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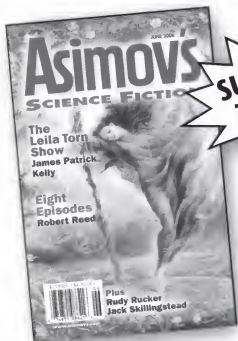
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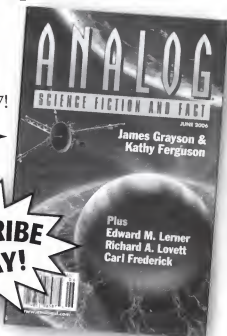
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IN MEMORIES YET GREEN

This month's editorial is a composite of short pieces. Each of the magazine's previous editors was asked to write about his or her tenure at the magazine, and I've included some recollections of my own. Shawna McCarthy recommended the title. At George Scithers's suggestion, the mix also incorporates Isaac Asimov's first editorial, which details the magazine's beginnings.

Isaac Asimov

I suppose I ought to start by introducing myself, even though that seems needless. The whole point about putting my name on the magazine rests on the supposition that everyone will recognize it at once, go into ecstatic raptures, and rush forward to buy the magazine. Well, just in case that doesn't happen, I'm Isaac Asimov. I'm a little over thirty years old and I have been selling science fiction stories since 1938. (If the arithmetic seems wrong here, it's because you don't understand higher mathematics.) I have published about forty books of fiction, mostly science fiction, and about 140 books of nonfiction, mostly science. On the other side of the fence, I have a Ph.D. in chemistry from Columbia University and I'm Associate Professor of Biochemistry at Boston University School of Medicine. —But let's not go on with the litany since I am (as is well known) very modest, and since I am the least important per-

son involved with this magazine.

Joel Davis, the publisher, is much more important. His company, Davis Publications, Inc., puts out over thirty magazines, including the enormously successful *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. It also publishes *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. With two such magazines under his belt, visions of empire arose before Joel's eyes, and it seemed to him he ought to have a science fiction magazine as sister to these. To retain symmetry, however, he needed a name in the title and he thought of me at once.

You see, I'm familiar to him because I have, in recent years, sold a score of mystery short stories to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and he would often catch me in suave conversation with Eleanor Sullivan and Constance DiRienzo, the bewitching young women who occupy the *EQMM* office. I can't say I fell all over myself with joy. The truth is I was worried. I told Joel that no science fiction magazine had ever borne a person's name on it, to my knowledge, and that the writers and readers would surely resent this as an example of overweening arrogance. He said, "Nonsense, Isaac, who could possibly accuse you of arrogance?"

—Well, that's true enough. But then I pointed out that the editors of the various other science fiction magazines were, one and all, personal friends of mine, and I would not wish to compete with them. He said, "You won't be competing with

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Editorial Director (1977-1992)

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Associate Editor

GARDNER DOZOIS

Contributing Editor

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them, Isaac. One more strong magazine in the field will attract additional readers, encourage additional writers. Our own success will help the other magazines in the field as well." (I consulted others and everyone agreed with Joel.)

Then I told Joel that I had a monthly science column running in one of the other science fiction magazines. It had been running without a break for eighteen years and under no circumstances could I consider giving it up. He said, "You don't have to give it up. Continue it exactly as before." (And I am doing so, with the blessing of the other magazine's editor.) But then I had the topper. I told him that the fact was I couldn't edit a magazine. I didn't have the ability or the experience or the desire or the time. He said, "Find someone you can trust, with the ability, the experience, the desire, and the time, and he can be the editor. You can be the editorial director, and the man you pick will work under your direction, for I want this to be your magazine, a reflection of your tastes with your kind of science fiction. You should keep an eye on what the editor buys, write the editorials yourself, and work closely with this editor to set policy and to solve problems as they come up."

So we agreed to that; now let me introduce the Editor. He is George H. Scithers, an electrical engineer specializing in radio propagation and rail rapid transit, who is a Lieutenant Colonel (retired) in the United States Army and who does a bit of writing on the side. He has been involved with the world of science fiction for over thirty years. He was the chairman of DisCon 1, the World Science Fiction Convention held in Washington in 1963

(where I got my first Hugo, so you can see what a well-run convention that was), and has been parliamentarian for several other conventions. He has a small publishing firm, Owlswick Press, publishing books of science fiction interest, notably the new revision of L. Sprague de Camp's *Science Fiction Handbook*. Furthermore, I know him personally, know that his tastes in science fiction are like mine and that he is industrious and reliable.

As Associate Editor, George has managed to get the services of Gardner Dozois, who is himself a contemporary science fiction writer of note.

Now what about the magazine itself? Life is risky for magazines in these days of television and paperbacks so we are starting as a quarterly. What reader support we'll get is now in the lap of the gods, but if things go as we earnestly hope they do, we will work our way up to monthly as soon as we can. We are concentrating on the shorter lengths, and there will be no serials. Novels have plenty of outlets these days, the shorter lengths relatively few.

With my name on the magazine, it won't surprise you to hear that we will lean toward hard science fiction, and toward the reasonably straightforward in the way of style. However, we won't take ourselves too seriously and not every story has to be a solemn occasion. We will have humorous stories and we will have an occasional unclassifiable story. We will have a book review column that will favor short notices of many books rather than deep essays on a few. We will have non-fiction pieces—that we will try to make as science-fiction-related as possible. We have one that will

cover a museum opening, for instance, but it's a space museum; and we're working on one that compares real life computers with those in science fiction stories. But you can see for yourself what we're trying to do if you read this issue and, undoubtedly, we will develop in ways not easily predictable at the start.

Two last points—for heaven's sake, don't send any manuscripts to me, send them to George Scithers. And for heaven's sake, be careful where you allocate credit. If this magazine pleases you, do give the credit to George Scithers and write and tell him so. He's doing the work.

—If, on the other hand, you decide it's a stinker, please send your letters to Joel Davis. The whole thing was his idea.

And remember, those letters that we find to be of general interest will be printed in a letter column along with comments by me; and we will try to spell your name correctly.

In addition to writing or editing over five hundred books, penning around ninety thousand letters, and receiving dozens of awards and honorary doctorates, Isaac Asimov was the magazine's beloved editorial director from 1977 until his death in 1992.

George Scithers

The early years working on *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* were some of the happiest, yet most challenging, of my life.

I had just retired from thirty

years in the U.S. Army and taken a job with the City of Philadelphia's Department of Public Property as the city's electrical engineer on a quarter-billion-dollar project to build a four-track, electrified commuter railroad through the center of that city; dream job for a railroad fan like myself. Then Dr. Asimov called me with even more of a dream job: to be the editor of a professional science fiction magazine as well!

And that came about like this: Joel Davis, president and publisher of Davis Publications, Inc., had long been the publisher of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. A year or so earlier, he had purchased the then-money-losing *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. He and his staff immediately turned it into a successful, money-making magazine. Looking for new fields to enter, Joel asked Isaac to be editor of a similarly titled publication, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*.

"But no," Isaac protested, "I'm not an editor, and besides . . ." and so on at some length. "But who. . . ?" Joel asked, and Isaac suggested me.

Isaac and I had met at various science fiction conventions over the years. We had mutual friends—the late L. Sprague de Camp, Lester del Rey, and John D. Clark. We were both members of the Trap Door Spiders, a supper club immortalized by Isaac in his Black Widowers mystery stories. And I had saved him from a lonely train ride when it happened that we took the same train from a mid-west science fiction convention to Boston.

I had written and sold short stories to the professional magazines—one to Fred Pohl at *If*, one to John W. Campbell at *Analog*, and another to Ben Bova, also at *Analog*.

While I had no experience as a *professional* magazine editor, I had been the publisher and editor for just over twenty years of the long-running, Hugo-winning sword-&-sorcery fanzine, *Amra*. And best of all, my work at the commuter railway project let me take the then-part-time job as the founding editor at *IA'sfm*, as we abbreviated the magazine's title in those days.

Starting a magazine from scratch would have been impossible without the substantial help from the Davis staff and from Joel himself. The late Fred Dannay, who had been editing *EQMM* for decades for Joel's father and then for Joel, gave me invaluable advice and support. Eleanor Sullivan, managing editor (and later editor in her own right) of *EQMM*, helped me set up the magazine's system of handling manuscripts and dealing with George Monette's Twin Company, our typesetter. Connie DiRienzo, contracts manager for all the Davis fiction magazines, helped me write our standard contract, based on *EQMM*'s and that of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*—a contract which I have since used with *Amazing Stories* and now *Weird Tales*. For the first few issues, Gardner Dozois, who had experience as a first reader for other magazines, served as *IA'sfm*'s associate editor.

Starting from scratch would have been *really* impossible without the help of the established science-fiction writers and of their organization, the Science Fiction Writers of America. As Jerry Pournelle once put it, I called in a lot of obs (a term from a story by Eric Frank Russell). As it turned out, starting took a few months longer than I had first assumed; after

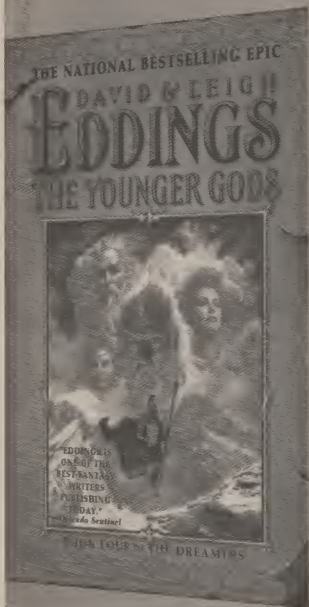
some discussions with Eleanor Sullivan and Fred Dannay, I had to go to Joel and ask for a little more time, which he gave.

In addition to the full-time staff in New York, I accumulated a small group of science fiction fans in Philadelphia—Darrell Schweitzer, who's been working with me ever since; Lee and Diane Weinstein; John Ashmead; and many others. At the same time, *IA'sfm* built up a group of new writers, notably Somtow Sucharitkil, Sharon Webb, the late John M. Ford, and Barry Longyear.

The magazine was originally conceived as a science fictional version of *EQMM*: no serials, almost entirely stories of six thousand words or less, and strictly science fiction with no fantasy content. And—because both Isaac and I have a weakness for humor—the magazine had very much of a light touch. We even picked up the Feghoot series of outrageous science fiction puns by Reginald Bretnor, writing as the anagrammatic Grendel Briarton.

As it turned out, Joel was right: there was indeed room for a new science fiction magazine. *IA'sfm* sold some sixty-five thousand copies of its first issue on the newsstands, and rapidly converted many of them to subscribers, some of whom are still with the magazine. The renewal rate for those initial subscribers was the best the company had ever seen, which reinforced Joel's decision to go from quarterly to bi-monthly publication for our second year, and to full monthly publication the year after. Our first cover was a photograph of Isaac; we soon shifted to science fiction paintings—a few illustrating specific stories, other, being general science fictional scenes. In

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those early years, Joel let me assign interior artwork and—in consultation with the company's art department—the covers as well.

By the time the magazine went monthly, it became apparent that there weren't enough pure science fiction short stories to keep the pages filled. We (who by then included the always capable Shawna McCarthy as full-time assistant editor in the Davis offices in New York. I had also left my railway planning job to become a full-time editor, commuting to New York once or twice a week) added fantasy and longer works. No serials—though there were works by Fred Pohl and by Jack Williamson that we presented as episodic novels appearing in successive issues rather than serials labeled as such.

Somewhere along the line, Joel asked if we could put together a companion magazine, 8.5 by 11 inches in size rather than the traditional digest format, which appeared as *Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine* with splendid covers repeated as double-page centerfolds. Shawna and I promptly assembled the new magazine, and we loaded it up with some of the best material we had in inventory. Notable stories included one of John Brunner's "Traveller in Black" tales, and Roger Zelazny's "Unicorn Variations." Alas—it only lasted four quarterly issues; at the time, there was simply no room for a 8.5-by-11-inch science fiction magazine on the newsstands. It tended to be put with the comics, and the comics readers of the time weren't interested in stories told in words rather than pictures.

Back at *IA'sfm*, we—editors, writers, and artists—were still having fun. I got some notable cov-

ers out of Alex Schomburg and Frank Kelly Freas. We ran one of L. Sprague de Camp's sword-&-planet short novels with a lovely Freas cover. And Schomburg and the *IA'sfm* gang of writers concocted what I remember as one of the most fun issues of my stay at the magazine.

A few years before, Don Wollheim had worked out the perfect cover for a Romance novel: a brooding manor (castle, watchtower, whatever) against a darkening sky. A female figure, fleeing in the foreground. And—Don's inspired touch—a single light in the manor's window.

Alex Schomburg's version: a very science fictional building grounded-spaceship/whatever in the background. A male figure fleeing in the foreground, and—again—a single light in the structure's window. Then the writers produced a half-dozen stories all built around that cover scene!

Ah—those were the fun times!

George Scithers received two Hugo Awards for editing Asimov's. In addition to founding our magazine, he also edited the venerable Amazing Stories. With Darrell Schweitzer and John Betancourt, he now edits the even more venerable Weird Tales and works full time for Wildside Press.

Kathleen Moloney

I was editor-in-chief of *IA'sfm* for only seven months, from July 1982 through the end of that year. Frankly I'm not quite sure how I got the job. I'd had several publishing gigs but no science fiction or fantasy background unless

you count reading *Animal Farm* in junior high. Despite my lack of experience I was hired, by Carole Dolph Gross and Joel Davis.

It took me a while to learn the ropes at *IAsfm*, and as I did so, I relied heavily on senior editor Shawna McCarthy, especially as a reader. She had superb taste, I thought. I liked just about everything she recommended—stories by John Brunner, Gregory Benford, Connie Willis, Robert F. Young, Sharon Webb, Glen Cook, Madeleine Robins, Richard Bowker, Steve Vance, and dozens of others. Our cover story in November was David Brin's "The Postman." I really liked that one.

While Shawna dug through the mail, I concentrated my efforts on trying to get Isaac Asimov to write more for us (with some success) and introducing new features. During my tenure we added a Profile (starting with Alvin Toffler, Harry Harrison, William Burroughs, Lewis Thomas, and Stephen Jay Gould), a cartoon we called "Mooney's Module," and a crossword puzzle, edited by Merl Reagle. In December of 1982, my swan song, we did a terrific special issue devoted to the publication of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation's Edge*. After that I went off to be an editor at Times Books, and Shawna McCarthy got my job.

Working in the world of science fiction was a strange but excellent adventure, and it remains the only time in my life I went to a convention with a weapons policy.

Happy thirtieth anniversary to *IAsfm*.

Kathleen Moloney lives and works—as a freelance writer—in New York City. She is married to Dominick Abel, a literary agent.

Shawna McCarthy

I have two words to say regarding my time at *Asimov's*: Dream Job. Seriously, I would walk home from the subway at night and think, *I am the luckiest person in the world*. First of all, I got to work in the genre I loved, doing something I was good at. Second of all (actually, maybe this should be first), I was working with ISAAC ASIMOV!!! Omigod! (Yes, I have teenage children.) Third of all, I got to hang out in interesting places with some of the most interesting people in the universe. My job took me to cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, London, Seattle, Chicago, Minneapolis (wait, what?), and Austin, where I got to stay in nice hotels, eat great meals with huge groups of people, appear on panels, go to parties, and flirt like crazy. For an unmarried twenty-five-year-old woman there was no better sphere to move in than the SF world—the male to female ratio was at least six to one, and they'd all been more or less pre-selected for brains and creativity, if not grooming.

Perhaps this sounds flip, but I'm sincerely trying to get across the joy that I took in working at *Asimov's*. All parts of it, even down to reading the slush and laying out the issues, gave me great pleasure, and while most middle-aged people will say, when reflecting on their youth, "I didn't know how good I had it," I must admit that I absolutely did know how good I had it. From the first day I walked into the office as George Scithers' assistant to the day I left to help found Bantam Spectra, I reveled in my job.

Now might be a good time to

point out though, that much as I loved my job, my job did not always love me back. As I mentioned above (albeit in a somewhat different context!), SF had (dare I say *has*?) always been a bit of a boys' club; in fact, George and Isaac actually knew one another from a literal boy's club, the Trap Door Spiders. As a woman, and as someone who did not come out of fandom, I think I brought a somewhat different spin to the magazine, one which was not entirely appreciated by the charter subscribers. Not unreasonably, they felt they had signed up for a magazine that reflected Isaac Asimov's sensibilities and style, one that offered straightforward stories with transparent prose, clear-eyed heroes, intriguing scientific puzzles, and awful puns. And while George published quite a few groundbreaking new authors (Connie Willis, anyone?), for the most part, under his editorship the magazine delivered exactly what the readers wanted.

Those halcyon days were not to last, however—I became editor and started publishing things that were, umm, controversial (anyone remember "Her Furry Face"?), things which caused the mailbox to fill with hate mail and caused Isaac no end of *tsuris*. That brave man was kept quite busy defending my choices, and saying in editorial after editorial that while he personally might not like some of my selections, they were all certainly well written and worthy of publication and that maybe the readership might want to try to keep an open mind. For my part, I hung in there, hoping that the "new" Asimov's would win over charter subscribers and find its new readership, and luckily for me,

eventually it did. My happiest day came about a year into my editorship when I opened the Nebula nomination list and found that stories from the magazine dominated the ballot. I felt vindicated and I'm sure Isaac felt relieved!

When, after much soul searching, I decided to try my hand at editing books, I was not about to leave the magazine in the hands of an unkindred spirit, and so I turned to the most kindred spirit I could find, Gardner Dozois. To my delight, he agreed to take over the editorship, and I knew my baby was safe in his and Sheila's capable hands.

I've been trying to sum up what I got from Asimov's, and I'm finding it almost impossible, because in the end, what I got was my life. What I do—hell, who I *am*—today, from editing *Realms of Fantasy*, to running my literary agency, to raising my children (yes, I met my husband through my work!) springs directly from my time there. The only thing I can say at this point is: thank you. Thank you, George; thank you, Joel; thank you, Isaac (wherever you are); thank you, Gardner; thank you, Sheila; thank you, readers; thank you, whatever powers might be, for everything.

Shawna McCarthy is a literary agent (The McCarthy Agency—what else?) and the fiction editor of Realms of Fantasy magazine. She has also at one time or another been senior editor at Bantam Spectra Books and Workman Publishing. She edited Asimov's during the Iron Age, and helped discover fire. Shawna was also the first woman to win the modern Best Editor Hugo Award.

Gardner Dozois

Although I had been associate editor for a year or so under George Scithers, we had parted ways years before, and I had no formal connection with *Asimov's* until the spring of 1985, when then-editor Shawna McCarthy took me aside during that year's Nebula Award Banquet (just after I'd gotten down from the stage for winning a Nebula for my story "Morning Child"), told me that she was stepping down, and asked me if I'd like to be the new editor of the magazine. The idea of returning to the magazine in an editorial capacity again had never occurred to me, and I was at first almost more surprised by the idea of Shawna leaving (like everybody else, I'd assumed that she'd be in the job for years if not decades to come) than by the idea of me taking over. After thinking about it for a few moments, though, I tentatively accepted.

Of course, technically the choice wasn't Shawna's to make, and I had to submit a formal resume in writing and go through a long interview with Joel Davis, then the magazine's publisher, and wait on pins and needles for awhile, before I was formally offered the job. Shawna's support of me as her candidate for the job, though, was the main reason why I got it, and to this day I'm not entirely sure why she wanted me as her replacement, except that I'd had some magazine experience in the past, reading slush for the UPD group of *Galaxy*, *Worlds of If*, *Worlds of Tomorrow*, and *Worlds of Fantasy*, and working on the first few issues of *Asimov's* way back at the beginning of the magazine. I'd also done a de-

cent job of editing a "Best of the Year" anthology, and I had been selling stories to her at *Asimov's* (winning a Nebula for the magazine with my story "The Peacemaker") in the previous couple of years. The fact that Isaac Asimov had agreed with some of the things I'd had to say about SF magazines on a convention panel the year before may have helped, as did, oddly, the fact that there were a number of other candidates for the job, some of whom wanted to produce a very different magazine indeed from the one I ended up producing, the proposed trajectories of which Isaac Asimov thoroughly disliked.

Things moved very quickly, and so, almost before I'd had a chance to get used to the idea or fully appreciate the fact that it was actually happening, I found myself installed as the new editor of *Asimov's Science Fiction* (then called *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*). I didn't expect to last long. Although I had cut my shoulder-length hippy-style hair before the interview, and had a cheap suit I used for occasions such as award banquets, I'd not shaved my beard and I was clearly not a corporate kind of guy, as the odd looks I got from others in the hallways attested. I'd also thought that Joel Davis had been squinting at me with deep suspicion during my interview, and had clearly had to have his arm twisted by Shawna into accepting me. So I thought that I'd last a few months, and then they'd fire me. Curiously, this may have been my greatest advantage. Figuring I'd only be there a few months, I decided that I had nothing to lose by taking as many risks as possible, and worked hard to completely and radically transform the tone of the magazine in as

short a time as possible. If I'd known I was going to be there for almost the next twenty years, I might have been more cautious and taken fewer literary risks, and so quite possibly have produced an inferior magazine.

Looking back at my days as editor, I can say that stories that I bought won thirty-four Hugo Awards (some years winning all three of the short fiction categories), fifteen Nebula Awards, and four World Fantasy Awards, that under my reign *Asimov's* itself won the Locus Award for Year's Best Magazine fourteen times in a row, and that I myself won the Hugo Award for Best Editor fifteen times. Not too bad a track record, I like to think, although now that my career as *Asimov's* editor is behind me, it'll be up to the critics and historians to evaluate it, and decide what it is I did and what—if anything—it all was really worth.

(I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank everybody I worked with at the magazine over the years, especially Sheila Williams, who worked side by side with me for all of those years, for helping to make the magazine what it was—and is.)

Gardner Dozois was the editor of Asimov's Science Fiction for almost twenty years, and still edits the annual Year's Best Science Fiction anthology series from St. Martin's Press, now up to its twenty-fourth annual collection. He is the author or editor of more than a hundred books, and has won fifteen Hugo Awards for his editing work and two Nebula Awards for his own short fiction.

Sheila Williams

Asimov's was founded by Isaac Asimov and Joel Davis, the owner of Davis Publications, a relatively small, family-owned publishing house. Fifteen years later, the magazine was sold to Bertelsmann, a publishing giant that now includes Random House, Doubleday, Bantam, Dell Books, the SF Book Club, Del Rey Books, and many other well-known publishing lines. One of Doubleday's top-selling authors was Isaac Asimov, and the parent company was excited to have his books and his magazine under one roof. With the sale to Bertelsmann, we became part of Dell Magazines, a venerable publishing company that was perhaps best known as the world's first crossword-magazine publisher. The Bertelsmann era, however, proved a short interlude. Four years later, Dell Magazines was sold to Penny Press, a family-run puzzle-magazine publisher. Dell and Penny had been competitors, and their merger into Penny Publications created a major force in the puzzle-magazine field. The purchase of Dell Magazines gave Penny an opportunity to diversify as well, since the sale included *Dell Horoscope*, *Ellery Queen* and *Alfred Hitchcock* mystery magazines, *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, and, of course, *Asimov's Science Fiction*. *Asimov's* continues to flourish today because of the support we receive from our publisher, Peter Kanter.

Starting professional life as an editorial assistant in a small company was an educational and nurturing experience. It was an opportunity to learn almost everything there was to know about magazine publishing. At first, it felt like I was making every single mistake that

could be made once. Luckily, there were a number of supportive and demanding colleagues who saw to it that I learned from those mistakes. I was immediately thrust into the mechanics of creating a magazine. Before the days of desktop publishing, that meant working with repro proofs and blue pencils. Last minute typos were eliminated by the art editor with an Exacto knife. In the days before fax machines, communication with our economical typesetter in Holyoke, Massachusetts, held to a tight schedule. One week was generally the best we could do to turn around corrections, so sudden changes of heart could only be accomplished by cannibalizing old repro. I was constantly in motion, dragging the heavy repro boards down out of the closet and running the hallways that separated the editorial department from the art department. In addition to the art department, I worked directly with the advertising, accounting, circulation, contracts, production, and subsidiary rights departments.

Moving to a large company, located in Times Square, was exciting. At first, the work didn't really change, but we all got corporate credit cards! Departments were more spread out, and there were a lot more meetings and memos. Eventually, our new publisher instituted desktop publishing. It had taken years to convince Davis Publications to give me a correcting typewriter. Now I could load an entire issue onto my computer—although doing so usually made it crash. The typesetter was gone, and I became less dependent on the art department. I could make all the corrections myself. Somehow, this change didn't make my job any easier, but it did make it more sedentary.

The Internet didn't happen for *Asimov's* until after our second sale. Our website went live in February 1998, and email became a way of life. Almost from the start of my employment, I had been responsible for writing all the biographical notes that accompany each story. Information was mostly collected through the US mail, but I got some of it by telephone. I got to know the authors very well, but I'm afraid my phone bills were correspondingly large. These days author corrections and biographical information usually arrives via email. Corrections can be made up until the day the magazine is released to the printer, and the entire issue sent electronically to the printer. Communication by email is a lot more impersonal than a phone call, but it's faster and cheaper. There's no handwriting to decipher, and no misheard information to garble in the blurbs.

Working for a large publishing outfit was an exciting experience, but adapting to Penny Publications felt a lot like coming home. Not too long ago, I was surprised to realize that I had been working for them longer than I had for Joel Davis. Over the years, many assistants have helped me pull the magazine together. Nowadays, I've handed over much of the magazine's production to the steadfast Brian Bieniowski. *Asimov's* has always had its talented authors to thank for the quality fiction that shows up in its pages every month. That the magazine shows up in your mailbox and on your newsstand is in many ways thanks not only to Brian and Peter Kanter, but to all the people you see listed on our masthead.

—Additional thanks to Gene Wolfe for thematic inspiration.

THIRTY YEARS!

In my first rapturous years as a reader of science fiction magazines, more than half a century ago, I greeted the advent of any new title with immense excitement. What a thrill it was to see an unfamiliar cover looking back at me from the array of magazines at the corner newsstand, and discover that another newcomer had arrived! 1949 brought *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 1950 delivered *Galaxy* and *Imagination* and *Worlds Beyond*, among others, 1952 produced *If*, *Space Science Fiction*, and half a dozen more, and the never-to-be-matched bumper crop of 1953 included *Fantastic Universe*, *Future Science Fiction*, *Universe*, *Science Stories*, *Vortex*, *Beyond*, *Science Fiction Plus*, and ever so many more. Most of them lasted just a few issues and all of them are ancient history, now, except for the perdurable *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. But for me the arrival of each in the candy store is still a well-remembered red-letter day, betokening who knew what fabulous fictional delights.

On the other hand, when the first issue of Isaac Asimov's *Science Fiction Magazine* made its appearance in the early weeks of 1977, I confess that I paid hardly any attention at all.

For one thing, I was no longer the starstruck teenager, gaga over all things science fictional, of the early 1950s. I was in my forties now, a veteran professional writer with decades of published work behind

me, and I not only had virtually stopped reading science fiction, I had given up writing it. My life had grown very complicated in the mid-1970s, I felt terribly tired, and I told anyone who was willing to listen that I had retired from writing forever. So I dutifully bought the first issue of *Asimov's*, because it was still my age-old and unbreakable habit, going back to those rapturous teen days, to buy the first issue of any new SF magazine. But I glanced through it with what could best be termed indifference, and put it on the shelf, and that, I thought, was that. No longer did the coming of a new SF magazine open infinite vistas for me. Since I had given up writing the stuff, and wasn't much interested in reading it, I didn't see how Isaac's new magazine could be of any relevance to my life at all. Little did I know.

I have that first issue before me now, and from its pristine condition I suspect that I never did get around to reading it. In format Issue Number One isn't extraordinarily different from the magazine that's in your hands right now. The page size is about half an inch shorter, and it has 192 pages instead of today's 144, but the typeface was a little larger back then, so the overall word-count of the two magazines is probably about the same. The text runs right across the page from right to left, book-style, rather than being divided into columns according to the usual custom of magazines. Instead of today's simply styled straight-up-

and-down cover heading that tells us that the magazine's name is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, the name of the magazine on that 1977 issue is splashed across half the cover in giant curving yellow letters against a startling red background, and took up even more space because the magazine, in those days, was called *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. Just to reinforce the point, the part of the cover that didn't blazon forth the name of the magazine contained a photograph of Isaac, a lovely picture of him in a dark jacket and light-blue necktie, looking formidably intelligent and quite handsome.

The price of that first issue was one dollar. (The price has quadrupled since then, but so has the price of almost everything else.) It was dated "Spring 1977," because the cautious publisher, Joel Davis, was launching the newcomer as a quarterly. (It was such an immediate success—within a year and a half it was the best-selling magazine in the field—that it shifted to bimonthly publication in 1978, to monthly publication in 1979, and for a giddy time beginning in 1981 published thirteen issues a year before gradually subsiding back to today's ten-times-a-year schedule.)

In my one indifferent glance at the Spring 1977 *Asimov's* I concluded that it was probably a pretty good magazine, and that if I were interested in writing science fiction at all, I would probably want to write for it. Isaac's presence on the masthead as editorial director guaranteed a certain level of quality, after all. And the actual editor, the man who would be picking the stories, was the knowledgeable and sophisticated George Scithers, whom I knew to be well

grounded in science fiction. (His associate editor at the outset was the young writer Gardner Dozois, who had already established himself as a storyteller of distinctive skills.) The first issue contained stories by such accomplished veterans of SF as Arthur C. Clarke, Gordon R. Dickson, and Fred Saberhagen, and a novelette by the brilliant new writer John Varley. (There were actually *two* Varley stories in the issue, one under a penname, but I didn't find that out until much later. The other one was "Air Raid," published as by "Herb Boehm," which has been much anthologized since and made into a film.)

But I wasn't writing science fiction in 1977, and, as I said, had no plans ever to do so again, so the new magazine receded to the back-burner part of my mind. I still maintained a social interest in the field, though. And over the next year or two I began to hear considerable buzz about the new magazine from my writer friends. It was, they said, the most exciting newcomer to emerge in the field in many years. They were all writing for it. George Scithers won the Hugo award in 1978 as Best Professional Editor, and won it again in 1980. Stories published in the magazine were being nominated regularly for both the Hugo and the Nebula, and some of them were winning them.

I ended my "retirement" from writing late in 1978 with a new novel, *Lord Valentine's Castle*, and began to think about writing a few new short stories, too. When I saw Scithers at the World Science Fiction Convention not long afterward he asked me whether I might care to write one for him, and I said I'd think about it if I ever did start doing them again.

Little did I know!

I *did* start writing stories again in January of 1980, and a few months later, after another gentle hint from George, I wrote my first for *Asimov's*, a very short piece called "The Regulars," with which I made my debut in these pages in the issue of May 11, 1981. (That was how they were dated then.) Soon afterward I followed up *Lord Valentine's Castle* with a group of stories set on the same planet, Majipoor, and three of them appeared in consecutive *Asimov's* issues in December of 1981 and January and February of 1982, with others to follow. And so it went for me thereafter at *Asimov's* as the magazine came to occupy a central position in my short-story-writing life. When Shawna McCarthy became editor later in the 1980s I did the novella "Sailing to Byzantium" for her, the first of my award-winners for *Asimov's*, and for her successor Gardner Dozois I did a whole raft of stories and novellas, maybe two dozen of them, including two more award-winners ("Gillgamesh in the Outback" (1987), and "Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another" (1990). And so on and so on ever since, even unto this very issue. And a year and a half after Isaac's death in 1992 I took on the task of writing this quasi-editorial column, "Reflections," which has appeared in all but one issue of *Asimov's* in the past thirteen years. (The one time I missed I was fighting a book deadline, and my wife Karen wrote a column in my place.)

Which amply demonstrates how important *Asimov's Science Fiction* has been to me across some twenty-seven of its thirty years of existence, and how foolish I feel about having paid so little attention to it

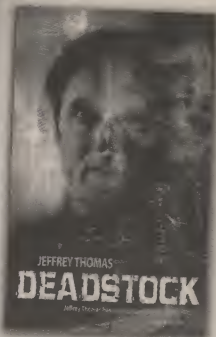
in its first three years. How important the magazine has been to its readers over the thirty years of its life has been made amply clear by the astonishing string of Hugo and Nebula awards its stories have gained—I hope Sheila Williams runs the full list somewhere in this issue—and the many honors that have come to its editors as well.

Now, in the capable and experienced hands of Sheila, its current editor, *Asimov's* enters its fourth decade of publication. Only a few SF magazines have reached that milestone. The list is headed, of course, by our companion magazine *Analog*, the once and future champion, which goes back to 1930. (But *Analog*, then called *Astounding Stories*, went out of business for six months in 1933.) The field's pioneer, *Amazing Stories*, ran from 1926 to 2005, but it too suffered interruptions of publication along the way, several of them, and seems to be undergoing permanent interruption now. *Weird Tales*, which published a great deal of SF, had a thirty-year-run from 1923 to 1954, and has been revived several times since, but there have been some very big gaps in its publication history. Only *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, of all the SF magazines we have had, has managed to continue without ever breaking continuity from its first issue to its current one, a span that now is approaching sixty years. But *Asimov's* hasn't been doing too badly in that area. It has sailed serenely along for three full decades, now, never missing a beat under three different corporate owners and five editors, and will, I trust, hang in there many decades more. I like to think that I'll be around in this column for at least some of that time. I hope you'll be here too. ○

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Asimov's Science Fiction

Hugo Award Winners

Novellas:

- 2000—The Winds of Marble Arch by Connie Willis
- 1998—. . . Where Angels Fear to Tread by Allen Steele
- 1997—Blood of the Dragon by George R.R. Martin
- 1996—The Death of Captain Future by Allen M. Steele
- 1993—Barnacle Bill the Spacer by Lucius Shepard
- 1992—Beggars in Spain by Nancy Kress
- 1991—The Hemingway Hoax by Joe Haldeman
- 1989—The Last of the Winnebagos by Connie Willis
- 1988—Eye for Eye by Orson Scott Card
- 1987—Gilgamesh in the Outback by Robert Silverberg
- 1986—24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai by Roger Zelazny
- 1985—Press Enter■ by John Varley
- 1983—Hardfought by Greg Bear
- 1980—Enemy Mine by Barry B. Longyear

Novelettes:

- 2004—Legions in Time by Michael Swanwick
- 2001—Millenium Babies by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
- 2000—10¹⁶ to 1 by James Patrick Kelly
- 1998—We Will Drink a Fish Together. . . by Bill Johnson
- 1997—Bicycle Repairman by Bruce Sterling
- 1996—Think Like a Dinosaur by James Patrick Kelly
- 1993—The Nutcracker Coup by Janet Kagan
- 1991—The Manamouki by Mike Resnick
- 1990—Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another by Robert Silverberg
- 1985—Bloodchild by Octavia Butler
- 1983—Fire Watch by Connie Willis
- 1982—Unicorn Variations by Roger Zelazny

Short Stories:

- 2005—Travels with My Cats by Mike Resnick
- 2002—The Dog Said "Bow-Wow" by Michael Swanwick
- 2000—Scherzo with Tyrannosaur by Michael Swanwick
- 1998—The 43 Antarean Dynasties by Mike Resnick
- 1997—The Soul Selects Her own Society. . . by Connie Willis
- 1995—None so Blind by Joe Haldeman
- 1994—Death on the Nile by Connie Willis
- 1993—Even the Queen by Connie Willis
- 1992—A Walk in the Sun by Geoffrey A. Landis
- 1991—Bears Discover Fire by Terry Bisson
- 1990—Boobs by Suzy Mckee Charnas
- 1988—Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers by Lawrence Watt-Evans
- 1984—Speech Sounds by Octavia Butler

Asimov's Science Fiction

Nebula Award Winners

Novel:

1991—Stations of the Tide by Michael Swanwick

Novellas:

2004—The Green Leopard Plague by Walter Jon Williams

1996—Da Vinci Rising by Jack Dann

1991—Beggars in Spain by Nancy Kress

1990—The Hemingway Hoax by Joe Haldeman

1988—The Last of the Winnebagos by Connie Willis

1987—The Blind Geometer by Kim Stanley Robinson

1986—R&R by Lucius Shepard

1985—Sailing to Byzantium by Robert Silverberg

1984—Press Enter by John Varley

1983—Hardfought by Greg Bear

1979—Enemy Mine by Barry B. Longyear

Novelettes:

1992—Danny Goes to Mars by Pamela Sargent

1987—Rachel in Love by Pat Murphy

1986—The Girl Who Fell Into the Sky by Kate Wilhelm

1985—Portraits of His Children by George R.R. Martin

1984—Bloodchild by Octavia Butler

1982—Fire Watch by Connie Willis

Short Stories:

1995—Death and the Librarian by Esther M. Friesner

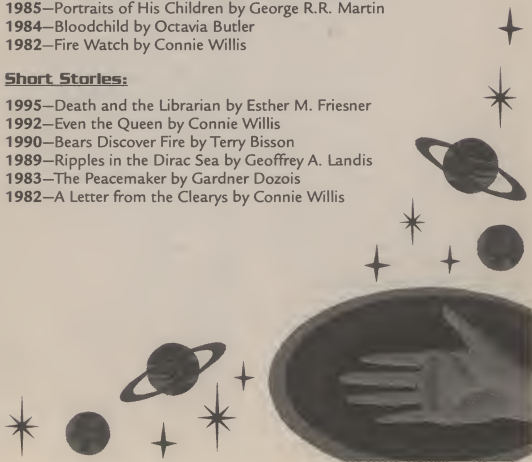
1992—Even the Queen by Connie Willis

1990—Bears Discover Fire by Terry Bisson

1989—Ripples in the Dirac Sea by Geoffrey A. Landis

1983—The Peacemaker by Gardner Dozois

1982—A Letter from the Clearys by Connie Willis



LETTERS

Dear Sheila—

I need to confess, when I first sold one of my stories to Asimov's—"The Utility Man," November 1990—my reaction was euphoria mixed with the cocky sense that "It's about time, dammit." After all, I'd been sending manuscripts to the correct address for several long years, testing the patience of two previous editors and then Gardner Dozois. But even with that first sale, nothing seemed easy. A lot of my work was sent back to me. Quite a few years had to pass before I could sell to the magazine on a halfway regular basis. And even now, when I send out a new story I have to brace myself for rejections, and if they don't come and I make the sale instead, then I feel that sweet old euphoria all over again.

Robert Reed
Lincoln, NE

Dear Editor,

I was one of several first readers for *Asimov's* back in the year it was launched. George Scithers, the first editor, had a house in West Philadelphia and I was one of his tenants. Every so often he would visit the publisher's offices in New York and haul back heaps of manuscripts for us to help him review, comment on, and mail back.

It was an exhilarating experience. Not only did we see lots of stories by first-time authors and currently popular authors, but we also saw material ranging from stories from old authors no longer publishing in the field to stories from emerging

authors just hitting their stride. It was a real thrill for me to be plowing through a pile of manuscripts in their original envelopes one afternoon and find two John Varley stories, one of them being "Air Raid." No rejection slip for those!

We first readers had an interesting fringe benefit. Back in those days, when the features and departments of the magazine were still pretty fluid, one idea being considered was to have a story by Dr. Asimov in every issue. This didn't happen, but we all got to have an early look at several Asimov stories before publication even if some of them ended up getting published elsewhere.

So, my memories of early issues of *Asimov's* not only include all your published stories, but lots of stories you never published as well.

Sanford Meschkow
Wynnewood, PA

Dear *Asimov's*:

Oh, my gosh! *Asimov's* can't be celebrating thirty years! Someone has done some kind of time warp. It was only last month that somebody at my writer's workshop told me Isaac Asimov was starting a new magazine that was going to redefine science fiction, only two weeks ago that I sent in "Fire Watch" and was blown away by Octavia Butler's "Blood Child," only last week that Gardner Dozois told me I was never going to get a cover illustration for one of my stories unless I put some spaceships or dinosaurs in them (advice James Patrick Kelly listened to

with fabulous results—"Think Like a Dinosaur"), only yesterday that Sheila Williams was bullying me to write another story for the Christmas issue. (Actually, that was only yesterday. Some things never change.) But when I start thinking of all the terrific stories I've read in *Asimov's*, from Joe Haldeman's "The Hemingway Hoax" to Nancy Kress's "Beggars in Spain" to Terry Bisson's "Bears Discover Fire," and of all the wonderful authors who've appeared in its pages—Robert Silverberg, Ursula K. Le Guin, Ted Chiang, Greg Bear, John Varley, Megan Lindholm, Mike Resnick, Paolo Bacigalupi, and, of course, Isaac—to say nothing of all the Hugo and Nebula and Best Editor Awards *Asimov's* has racked up, then it seems like it must have been around for at least a couple of hundred years! So, congrats! Thanks for being such a great magazine to work for—for indulging me and letting me write my Christmas stories and romantic comedies and those stories everybody else said weren't really science fiction; thanks for having such great editors and columns and editorials and art and poems—and stories! Most of all, thanks for creating a magazine at once innovative and old-fashioned, fun and literary, and thanks for letting me be a part of it! May you be around for another thirty—no, fifty—no, a thousand years!

Connie Willis
Greeley, CO

Dear Sheila—

Forgive my familiarity, but I feel as if I actually know you, since I've seen your name every month since you first joined this wonderful magazine. I'll never forget when I first discovered *Asimov's Science Fiction* in 1980. I had just landed a job as clerk at a local bookstore and newsstand. As an employee, there were

no sick days or health care benefits. The only benefit was that I could have three books or magazines free every week. This seemed like a goldmine to me! That first week, I discovered an issue of *Asimov's*, but was horrified to find that in order to have it for free, I would have to tear the cover off of it. Why, the cover was half of the intrigue for me. I paid for the issue rather than defile it. Inside, I discovered a collection of stories that I thought had been gathered just for me, a girl who loved real sciencey science fiction. I already loved the Good Doctor and here he was in my hand, practically speaking to me personally, in his editorials every month. I loved him all the more for them. I've since fallen in love with a raft of authors, some familiar and many new. Ever since that magic moment of discovery, no matter if I could afford it or not, I have subscribed to this dear magazine that has been so much a part of my daily life. Now, as a middle-school English teacher, I even use some the stories and poems to entice my students into the amazing world of science fiction. Thanks for being there for me throughout all of these years.

Margaret Livingstone
Northfield, MA

Hi Sheila,

I write this in the shadow of Thanksgiving, 2006, and so I'd like to take a moment to give thanks for *Asimov's*. My first sale to *Mov's* in 1983 was "Still Time" a story that was very worried about nuclear war. Thank goodness that's not a problem anymore! Er . . . um . . . never mind. Well, anyway, my count so far is thirty-five stories, forty-seven "On The Net" columns, thirteen poems, and now, finally, a letter to the editor. Speaking of editors, I want to

thank Shawna, Gardner, and Sheila for giving me the chance to write to you so often over the years, dear readers.

I have a lot of wonderful memories of great times with the *Asimov's* crew, and lots of them center around meals that I shared with them (and the magazine paid for!) Oddly enough, the spread I remember best wasn't the most expensive. After the very first *Asimov's* Readers' Awards in 1987, Gardner and Sheila took some of their writers out for dinner at a Chinese restaurant—somewhere in Manhattan, I forget where exactly. I was fortunate to be invited as was my good friend Connie Willis. I remember we talked long into the night; I believe we might have closed the place. But what sticks in my mind is that Gardner ordered fried dumplings. "What are they?" I asked. "You've never had dumplings before?" asked my incredulous editors. And that's how the hick from New Hampshire had his first dumpling. Mmm—I can still taste the dipping sauce.

I've said this before and I'm saying it again here: *Asimov's* is where almost all of the work I'm best known for has first appeared. So Happy Birthday, *Asimov's* and thanks for all the dumplings!

James Patrick Kelly
Nottingham, NH

Illustrious staff:

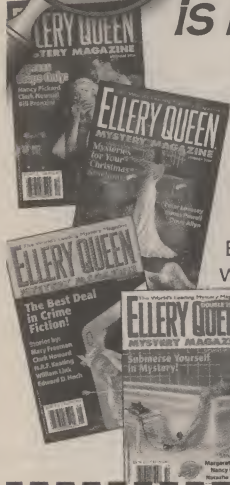
I would not turn down an invitation to write a letter for the thirtieth Anniversary issue of your magazine. I think that is a great occasion and one that should be signified by optimism. It's being said that science fiction is "dying" (there's no such thing as death); I must have been looking at *Asimov's* when the evidence was on view, and reading the stories when the contention was being discussed, because I remain unconvinced of the truth of this assertion. I know that Asimov will be leaping for joy in the self-created domain where he now resides as he considers the thirty years of success of his magazine.

Only just "thanks" for the most recently received issue of the magazine—Charles Stross, Nancy Kress, and a wonderful picture of Icarus by Michael Whelan on the cover, and James Patrick Kelly keeping computer activity going in a big way in his Net column. Your prediction of the authors you have coming up in 2007 assures you that I will keep reading the magazine, if my recent subscription re-up does not. Thanks again for all the fiction you've been giving us in thirty grand years of publication.

John Thiel
Lafayette, IN

We welcome your letters. They should be sent to ***Asimov's***, 475 Park Avenue South, Floor 11, New York, NY 10016, or e-mailed to **asimovs@dellmagazines.com**. Space and time make it impossible to print or answer all letters, but please include your mailing address even if you use e-mail. If you don't want your address printed, put it only in the heading of your letter; if you do want it printed, please put your address under your signature. We reserve the right to shorten and copy-edit letters. The email address is for editorial correspondence *only*—please direct all subscription inquiries to: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855.

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THE RIVER HORSES

Allen M. Steele

"The River Horses" is a stand-alone Coyote story that takes place after "Home of the Brave" (December 2004)—the story that comprises the last chapter of *Coyote Rising* (the second volume of the Coyote trilogy), and precedes the events of *Coyote Frontier*, the third volume. The author's latest novel, *Spindrift*, which is set in the same universe, is just out from Ace Books.

The shed's wooden doors rumbled as they were pushed apart by a couple of proctors. Early morning sun flooded the barnlike interior, causing Marie to raise a hand to her eyes. About thirty yards away, her brother walked up the dirt path that would lead him back to town. For a moment she thought Carlos would turn to wave goodbye, but he'd turned his back upon her, and there was nothing more to be said between them.

The proctors finished opening the vehicle shed. Neither of them spoke as they turned toward her, but the one on the left tucked a thumb in his gun belt, his hand only a few inches from the butt of his holstered flechette pistol, while his companion nodded toward the skimmer parked behind her. A wayward grasshoarder fluttered into the building; Marie's eyes followed the small bird as it alighted upon the floodlight rack mounted above the glass hemisphere of the hovercraft's cockpit. Then Lars started the twin duct-fan engines; alarmed by the abrupt roar, the grasshoarder flew away.

"Time to go, Ms. Montero." Manny loaded the last crate of supplies aboard the skimmer; grasping the hatch-bar of the starboard cargo bin and pulling it shut, the savant walked over to her. "We have to leave."

Marie didn't respond. Instead, she glanced back toward where she'd last seen Carlos, only to find that her brother had already disappeared into the tall grass that lay between Sand Creek and Liberty. She'd expected him to watch her leave, at least; finding that he wasn't going to do even this, she felt something cold close around her heart.

"Ms. Montero . . ."

Something touched her left shoulder; looking around, she saw that Manny had laid one of his clawlike hands upon her. "Get away from me," she snapped as she tried to swat it away. The four-fingered claw was

made of ceramic carbon, though, and was hard as steel. Flesh met unre-sisting metal, and she winced in pain.

"Sorry." As always, the savant's face registered no emotion; it was only a silver skull, a death's head shrouded by the raised hood of his black cloak. His remaining eye, the right one, emitted a faint amber hue; the left one was covered by a patch. His hand disappeared within the folds of his robe. "I didn't mean to . . ."

"Just stay away, all right?" Marie had spent the last several years of her life learning how to hate Manuel Castro; just because he'd volunteered to accompany her and Lars didn't give her any reason to make friends now. Massaging her fingertips, she stepped around him and marched toward the skimmer. Within the cockpit, Lars waited for her, his face impassive as he kept the engines at idle. Marie glanced up at him and he gave her a quiet nod. No point in standing around, and they had no choice; it was time to go.

She was about to mount the ladder to the skimmer's middeck when Chris Levin came up behind her. "Marie . . ."

She paused, her hands on the ladder's bottom rung. The Chief Proctor held out a satphone, wrapped in a waterproof catskin packet. "In case the com system goes down," he said, his voice barely audible above the muttering engines. "Don't use it unless . . ."

He stopped, not needing to finish the rest: *Unless you're in so much trouble that you can't get yourselves out of it. Then we might come get you, but only if it's a life or death situation. Otherwise, you're on your own.*

She wondered if he was embarrassed by what was happening here. After all, he himself had been made an outcast once, many years ago. Marie took the satphone, hooked it to her belt. She thought to say something, then realized that any words from her would be pointless. Behind Chris, another proctor watched her; his eyes were hidden by a pair of sunglasses, yet his expression was unkind. Not wanting to give anyone the satisfaction of hearing her beg forgiveness, she simply nodded. Chris gave her a tight-lipped smile, then offered his hand. Marie chose to ignore the gesture, though; the last thing she wanted was belated sympathy from her brother's best friend. Turning away from them, she grasped the ladder rungs and climbed up onto the skimmer.

The top hatch was open; she climbed down into it and, ducking her head, clambered through the narrow aft compartment into the cockpit. The skimmer was an Armadillo AC-IIb, a light assault vehicle left behind by the Union Guard after the Revolution; there were four seats within the bubble, two forward for the pilot and co-pilot, two in back for the gunner and engineer. The 30mm chain gun and rocket launchers had been removed, though, and only a few capped wires showed where the weapons-control panel had been dismantled. Seeing this, she wondered whether the skimmer's armament had been taken out before now, or if the magistrates had decided that they didn't want to risk giving her and Lars enough firepower to level most of the colony. She wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer.

"Ready to go?" Lars glanced over his shoulder at her. Marie didn't say

anything as she squeezed past him, making her way toward the bucket seat on the right forward side. "Okay, then let's go. . . ."

"You're not forgetting someone, are you?" Castro's leaden footfalls had been lost in the growl of the idling engines; Marie looked around to see the savant's head and shoulders emerge through the hatch leading to the aft compartment. "I'd be insulted if you did."

Lars didn't reply, yet his hands fell from the control yoke and his head fell back on his neck. "I wouldn't be . . . never mind." Then he turned to look at the savant. "Look, we're going to get along fine if you'll just keep your mouth shut."

"My mouth *is* shut, Mr. Thompson." Castro's voice emerged from the vocoder grille on the lower part of his face. "I wouldn't have it any other way . . . and you?"

Lars slowly let out his breath. He turned back around, but when he grasped the yoke again, Marie noticed that the knuckles of his hands were white. "Keep pushing it," he murmured. "Just keep pushing it. . . ."

"Let's just go, okay?" Through the curved panes of the canopy, she could see the proctors watching them, their hands never far from their sidearms. Chris had stepped away from the vehicle; she briefly met his eye, and saw that any vestige of their childhood friendship had been lost behind an implacable mask of authority. Suddenly, she was sick of Liberty and everyone who lived here. "C'mon. I just want to get out of this place."

A grim smile crept across Lars' face. "Your wish is my command." He reached to the twin throttle bars, gently slid them upward. The engines revved to a higher pitch, and the hovercraft rose upon its inflatable pontoons and began to ease forward . . . and then, obeying a sudden, violent impulse, Lars shoved the bars the rest of the way into high gear.

"Hang on!" he yelled, as the skimmer lunged for the shed doors.

The proctors standing at the entrance were caught by surprise. For a moment, they stared at them in shock, then threw themselves out of the way. Marie caught a brief glimpse of the proctor to the right as he tripped over a barrel and fell to the concrete floor. For a moment, she thought Lars would run over him, but the proctor managed to scramble out of the way before the Armadillo swept out of the shed.

"Yeee-haaah!" Lars's rebel yell reverberated within the cockpit, almost drowning out the engines. "Run, you sons of bitches! *Run!*"

Once the skimmer was clear of the shed, he twisted the yoke hard to the right, aiming for the nearby creek. Pieces of grass and flecks of mud spattered the bottom part of the bubble; Marie clung to her armrests as her body whiplashed back and forth in her seat.

"Gangway!" Lars shouted. "Mad driver! Run for your . . . !"

"Stop it!" Marie reached forward, grabbed the throttle bars. "Stop it right now!"

She yanked the throttle back in neutral. The back end of the skimmer lifted slightly as it coasted to a halt, less than a half-dozen yards from the creek. Through the tall grass, she caught sight of a canoe drifting near the shore; two teenagers, neither much younger than her or Lars, stared at them in horror, their fishing poles still clutched in their hands. In another second or two, Lars would have mowed them down.

Lars's laughter died, the ugly amusement in his eyes suddenly turning to frustrated anger. "You said you wanted to get out of here," he said, grabbing her hand and trying to pry it away from the throttles. "I was just doing like you . . ."

"That's not what I meant!" Wincing against his grasp, she wrapped her fingers more firmly around the bars. "I don't want to leave this way," she added, speaking more

softly now. "I just want to . . ." *I want to come back some day when no one is afraid of me anymore, or at least when my own brother can look me in the eye.* "Just take it easy," she finished, struggling for words that might get through to him. "Show a little class, y'know what I mean?"

Dull comprehension crept across her boyfriend's face. "Yeah, sure," he murmured. He released his grip from her hand, and it wasn't until then that she realized how much he'd hurt her. "Just take it easy," he said, repeating what she'd said as if the idea was his own. "Show a little class. . ."

"That's it." Marie let go of the throttles. "Be cool. That'll really bug 'em."

The outlaw smirk reappeared on Lars's face. He laid his right hand on the throttles again, and for a moment Marie thought he'd jam them forward once more. But instead he eased the bars up just a half-inch, and the skimmer responded by sluggishly moving forward. The teenagers in the canoe had already paddled out of range by the time the Armadillo entered the narrow river; there was a mild splash as the pontoons drove water against the cockpit, rinsing away torn-up grass and mud.

"So," Lars asked, "which way you want to go?"

"To. . ." Marie hesitated. "I don't know." She pointed downstream, south from where they were now. "That way, at least until I can get our bearings."

"Our bearings?" He glanced at her. "What, you don't know where you are? I mean . . ."

"Just go that way, okay?"

She pushed herself out of her seat. Castro's skeletal face raised slightly as she brushed against him; for a brief instant, as the multifaceted ruby of his right eye gleamed at her, she caught dozens of tiny reflections of herself, each tinted the color of diluted blood. Yet the savant said nothing as she ducked her head to make her way through the aft-section hatch, and anything else Lars might have said to her was lost in the thrum of the skimmer's engines.

The day was a little older when she climbed out through the topside hatch. Grasping the slender handrails, she stood upon the middeck, feeling the engines vibrating beneath the soles of her boots as she gazed back

"I read the first issue of *Asimov's* when I was a high school senior, and, since even then I was an aspiring science fiction writer, I looked forward to the day that I'd find my own stories in this magazine. Thirty years later, I've had more than three-dozen stories published here, including two Hugo winners and four that have received the annual Readers' Award. So it's a quite an honor to be back for the thirtieth anniversary issue."

—Allen M. Steele

the way the way they'd just come. The wood-shingled rooftops of Liberty were already lost to her; she caught a last glimpse of the grange hall, the tall mast of its adjacent weather tower rising above the treetops. A minute later, the faux-birch cabins and shops of Shuttlefield went by; the shadow of Swamp Road Bridge fell across her, and Marie looked up to see a little girl, not much older than she herself had been when she'd come to Coyote, waving to her from its railing. Marie lifted her hand to wave back, and the girl beamed at her, delighted to be acknowledged by a woman traveling down Sand Creek, bound for glories that she could only imagine.

Marie stood on the deck until the last vestiges of human civilization disappeared behind her. Then, wiping tears from her eye with the back of her hand, she climbed back down the hatch.

From the journal of Wendy Gunther: Uriel 47, c.y. 06

Today was First Landing Day, our first since the Revolution. I should be happy, but it's hard for me to join the celebration: we sent Marie and Lars into exile today.

That's not the official term, of course. The magistrates are calling it "corrective banishment," and claim that it's a more benign form of punishment than sentencing them to a year in the stockade. Perhaps this bends Colony Law a bit, but count on Carlos to come up with a new idea; he didn't want to see Marie do hard time, so he used his mayoral influence to convince the maggies that his sister and her boyfriend would benefit from being sent to explore the wilderness. And since Marie and Lars are former members of the Rigil Kent Brigade, no one wanted to put a couple of war vets on the road crew. Better for them to do something that might serve the community more than digging ditches and hauling gravel.

I thought Clark Thompson would object. After all, he's not only a member of the Colonial Council, but Lars is also his nephew. From what I gather, he and his wife Molly raised Lars and his brother Garth as their own children after their parents were killed (never got the full story on that—wonder what happened?). But Clark is as tough as Molly is gentle, and he was furious when he learned that his boy held a man's arms behind his back while Marie slashed his face with a broken bottle, the outcome of a tavern brawl that should have been settled with fists and nothing worse. Like Carlos, Clark figured that statutory reform was preferable to penal time, so he agreed not to stand in the way while the magistrates sent Lars and Marie into exile . . . pardon me, "corrective banishment."

They may be right. Marie and Lars aren't hardened criminals, nor are they sociopaths (or at least Marie isn't—I'm not too sure about Lars). Yet the fact remains that both of them came into adulthood fighting a guerilla war against Union forces. In a better world, Marie would have spent her adolescence knitting sweaters and fidgeting in school, while Lars might have done nothing more harmful than pestering the neighbors with home-made stink bombs. But they were deprived of that sort of idyllic fantasy; they grew up with rifles in their hands, learning how to shoot enemy sol-

diers from a hundred yards away with no more remorse than killing a swamper. Their first date should have been a shy kiss and a furtive grope behind the grange hall, not a quick screw somewhere in occupied territory, with one eye on the woods and their weapons within arm's reach.

So this morning, just before sunrise, Chris had his proctors release them from the stockade. They were marched down to the vehicle shed, where they were given a decommissioned Union Guard skimmer, along with rifles, ammo, wilderness gear, and enough food to last them a month. And then Carlos told them to get lost . . . literally. Go out and explore the boonies, and don't come back for six months. If they show up in any of the other colonies—Defiance, New Boston—they'll be arrested and sent back here to serve out the rest of their sentence, plus six months, in the stockade. Until then, they're expected to survey the wilderness and use the skimmer's satphone to make a report every couple of days or so on what they've found.

I have to hand it to my husband: as solutions go, it's not such a bad one. The Union occupation pretty much forestalled further exploration of Coyote, or at least beyond what we found on Midland while we were hiding from the Union. Once the Revolution ended, we had our hands full, dealing with the climatic after-effects of the Mt. Bonestell eruption. So nearly eight-tenths of this world have never been seen except from space; the maps we have, for the most part, are little more than composites of low-orbit photos.

Time to send out the scouts, even if they're conscripts. Carlos spent several months alone on the Great Equatorial River, so he knows it's possible to live off the land. And I know how he changed for the better from that experience. He left Liberty as an irresponsible, reckless boy, and came back as the man I was willing to marry and be the father of my child. Why not have his sister and her boyfriend have the same benefit?

And it isn't as if they're completely on their own. Manny Castro has volunteered to go with them. To be sure, this is a calculated risk. Manny isn't just a savant—he was also the lieutenant governor of Liberty during the Union occupation. Lars even attempted to drown him after he was captured during the Thompson's Ferry massacre. But Manny is trying to find his place in the world, I think, now that the Matriarch is gone and the Union has fled Coyote . . . and perhaps Lars should learn what it's like to live with someone whom he once tried to murder.

So it's all very logical, all very sane, all very benign. Everything we've done today is in keeping with the sort of society we aspire to create on this world. And yet . . . I'm still not certain whether we've done the right thing. We can justify our actions with our choice of words, yet the fact remains that we've just sent three people into exile.

I've never been much of a religious person. My faith is in the human spirit, not in what most people call God. Nonetheless, if there are angels in the heavens, I pray that they guard and protect those whom we've made outcasts.

They made camp late that afternoon downstream from Liberty, on a brush-covered spit of land formed by the divergence of Levin Creek from

Sand Creek. This was boid country; they were near the place where, four Coyote years ago, Jim Levin and Gil Reese had lost their lives in a fateful hunting expedition. Marie knew the story well; Carlos had been on that same trip, back when he was a teenager. She was reluctant to spend the night there, but Lars was nonchalant about the risk they were taking.

"Look, we've got rifles," he said, "and we've got *it*." He pointed to Manny, who'd undertaken the task of unloading their gear from the skimmer, now floating next to the gravel beach where they'd dropped anchor. "Better than perimeter guns . . . it can stay awake all night, and shoot anything that moves."

"I can do that, yes." Manny walked down the lowered gangway, aluminum food containers clasped within each claw. "That is, if I don't put myself in rest mode. Helps to conserve power, you know. . . ."

"Shut up." Lars lay on the beach where he'd thrown down a thermal blanket, his back propped against the still-folded dome tent. He unwrapped a ration bar, carelessly tossing the wrapper into the cloverweed behind him. "When you get done unloading everything, you can set up the tent. Then you can get started on dinner." He glanced over at Marie. "What do you want to eat tonight?"

Before Marie could reply, Manny dropped the containers. "Mr. Thompson, I'll tell you this once, and once only. Appearances notwithstanding, I'm not a robot, and I refuse to be treated as such. If you want anything from me . . ."

"You're our guide, Robby. You volunteered for the job, remember?"

"A guide, not a slave . . . and as I was saying, if you want anything from me, then you'll treat me with common human respect. That begins with not calling me 'it' or 'Robby' or anything other than . . ."

"I dumped your metal ass in the river once." Lars stared at him. "Give me a reason to do it again . . . please."

Manny gave no answer. Instead, he strode across the beach to where Lars lay, until he was close enough for his shadow to fall across the young man. Lars hastily scrambled backward on his hands and hips, as if afraid that the savant was about to attack him. But Manny merely regarded him for a moment before he slowly turned his back upon Lars and, ever so deliberately, lowered himself to the ground, folding his legs together in lotus position. As Marie watched, the savant rested his hands upon his knees, lowered his head slightly, and became silent.

And there he remained for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, motionless and quiet, even as daylight faded away and darkness came upon the tiny island. Lars kicked at him, swore at him, even pulled out a rifle and threatened to shoot him. Yet Manny refused to budge; the multifaceted corona of his right eye, now dimmed ever so slightly, reflecting the setting sun a dozen different ways as he meditated upon whatever it was that savants thought about when they entered rest mode. By then it'd become obvious that they would receive no cooperation from him; Marie pitched the tent while Lars was still throwing his tantrum, and she finally managed to get him to help her gather driftwood for a campfire. Dinner came late, and was little more than sausage and beans warmed in a skillet above the fire; when they finished eating, Marie

coaxed Lars into gathering the plates and utensils and washing them in the shallows. And still Manny remained inert and silent.

Bear was rising to the east, the leading edge of its ring-plane a spear-head against the gathering stars, when Marie lighted a fish-oil lamp and used it to illuminate the map she'd spread out on the ground next. "We've got to figure out where we're going," she said, kneeling over it. "We can't keep going down Sand Creek. . . ."

"Why not?" Lars pointed to where it flowed into the East Channel. "Look, that's only a day away or so. Once we make the channel, all we have to do is follow it until we reach the big river." By that he meant the Great Equatorial River, which encircled Coyote like an endless, elongated ocean. "Get there, and we can go anywhere."

"Not the way we're going, we can't." Marie tapped a finger against the Eastern Divide, the long, high ridge that separated the New Florida inland from the East Channel. "The only way through is the Shapiro Pass. Carlos went through that in a kayak, and it almost killed him."

"But we don't have a kayak. We've got that big mother over there. . . ."

"Even worse." Marie let out her breath, looked up at him. "I've been through it, too, remember? In a keelboat, back in '03 when we evacuated Liberty. That was in mid-winter, when the water was high, and even then we nearly ripped out the bottom of the boat. The rapids . . . trust me, this time of year, the rapids are murder. We'll never make it."

"Yeah, yeah, okay." Lars had learned not to argue with Marie about the terrain of places where she'd already been. He pointed to the Garcia Narrows Bridge, northeast of their present location, where it crossed the East Channel to Midland from the Eastern Divide. "So we cut across country, take the bridge. . . ."

"Can't do that either. That'll take us into Bridgeton and Forest Camp—" she indicated the settlements on the east and west sides of the bridge respectively—"and we were told to stay away from the other colonies."

"C'mon . . . you're not taking that seriously, are you?" A smirk came to his face. "I got friends in Bridgeton. Lester, Tiny, Biggs . . . I'm sure any of them would put us up for a few days." He gave her a wink. "Maybe even six months, if we play our cards right. . . ."

"Or they would turn you in as soon as they saw you, and avoid jail time themselves."

Startled by the unexpected sound of Manny's voice, Marie looked up to see the savant gazing at them. Sometime during the last few minutes, he'd risen from his perch at the water's edge and turned to face them, a black specter half-visible by the firelight.

"No one will help you," Manny went on, as if he'd been part of the conversation all along. "The word is out, or at least it will be by the time you make it to the next town. You're *persona non grata*. Bad company. Anyone who associates with you risks stockade time. I wouldn't count on . . ."

"I thought I told you to shut up." Lars scooped up a handful of gravel, flung it at the savant. It clattered off his metal chest, ineffective as it was impulsive; Manny didn't move, but simply stood there. Lars shook his head and looked down at the ground. "God, I need a drink. Didn't we bring any booze?"

"Did you ever stop to consider that drinking may be the source of all your . . . ?"

"If you want to help," Marie said, "you can start by not lecturing us." Picking up the map, she stood up and walked over to him. "We need a place to go. If we can't go south or east, and north takes us back to Liberty . . ."

"Then it's obvious, isn't it? You should follow Horace Greeley's advice."

"Who the hell is Horace Greeley?" Lars muttered.

"Go west, young man, go west." Taking the map from Marie, Manny studied it for a moment. She was surprised that he could see it without the aid of a flashlight, then remembered that he was gifted with infrared vision; bearlight was sufficient for his electronic eyes, even if one of them was permanently damaged. "If we cross Sand Creek and go west by southwest for about fifty miles, we'll arrive at the confluence of North Creek and Boid Creek. And if we follow Boid Creek upstream for another hundred and twenty miles, we'll reach the West Channel, just past the mouth of the Alabama River. From there . . ."

"Wait a sec." Marie held up a finger, then dashed back to the campfire to pull a pocket light from her pack. Bringing it back to where Manny stood, she switched it on and held it over the map so that she could read it as well. "Oh, no . . . no, that's no good. That's almost two hundred miles through back country, with the first fifty across dry land."

"The skimmer is designed for all-terrain travel. Deflate the pontoons, and it'll operate just as well in high grass. It'll run a little slower, granted, and we'd do well to avoid heavy brush, but once we reach Boid Creek, we'll make up for lost time."

"Aren't you forgetting something, Robby?" Still not rising from where he sat, Lars snapped a branch in half and fed it into the campfire. "Back country means boid country. Maybe you don't have anything to worry about, but us flesh 'n blood types . . ."

"I have no more desire to encounter boids than you do, Mr. Thompson. I doubt they'd distinguish very much between a savant and a baseline human . . . and I've asked you not to call me Robby." He returned his attention to Marie. "The first fifty miles will be the toughest, I grant you that, but, with luck and skillful driving, we can probably travel the distance in only a day or two. Once we reach Boid Creek, we'll be on water again. After we reinflate the pontoons, we should be able to cover. . ."

A harsh scream broke the quiet of the evening, a high-pitched howl that drifted across the savannah and caused the hair on the back of Marie's neck to stand. She immediately switched off her light, even as Lars looked around for where he'd left his rifle. Only Manny was unperturbed; pulling back the hood of his cloak, he turned his head toward the direction from which the sound had come, as if searching for its source.

"It's not close," he said. "No less than two miles, at least. But . . ."

"But what?" Marie peered into the darkness. Once again, she became aware just how vulnerable they were. The narrow creeks on either side of the island offered little protection from what was out there.

"Wait," Manny said softly. "Just wait. . . ." Then they heard another boid cry, this time from a slightly different direction, and a little louder than

the first. "Ah, so," he added. "That would be the mate. They work together, frightening their prey into making them run first one way, then another, until they become disoriented. Then . . ."

"I got the idea." Yet in all the years she'd spent on Coyote, this was the first time she'd heard of this. Not even Carlos, who had a boid skull on his cabin wall as a hunting trophy, possessed that kind of insight. "So what do we do?"

"Keep the fire going. They associate open flame with brush fires caused by lightning storms, and they tend to avoid those. Otherwise, all we need to do is stay where we are and make as little sound as possible. We don't want to draw their attention." Folding the map, Manny handed it back to her, then walked over to the fire, where Lars crouched, rifle at hand. "Thank you for allowing me to recharge, Mr. Thompson. If you'll give me your weapon, I'll be happy to stand watch tonight."

Lars gazed at him warily, unwilling to surrender his carbine. "Give it to him," Marie said quietly. "He knows what he's doing . . . I think."

"Believe me," Manny said, "I do." Lars hesitated, then stood up and, without another word, relinquished the rifle to the savant. Manny checked the cartridge to make sure that it was fully loaded, then tucked it beneath his right arm, pulling back his robe so that it wouldn't get in the way. "Now go to bed, both of you. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever." Standing a little straighter, Lars tried to muster what remained of his earlier bravado. "So what's for breakfast tomorrow, Robby?"

"I don't use it myself, sir . . . it promotes rust." Manny's voice became deeper and more mechanistic as he said this. It sounded like another quote, yet Marie couldn't quite put her finger on it. Humiliated, Lars slinked off to the tent, muttering something she didn't quite understand. She watched while he fumbled with the zipper, waited until he went inside, then turned to Manny.

"Thanks, Savant Castro," she murmured. "I appreciate it."

"Of course, Ms. Montero." His voice returned to its former inflection. "And, by the way . . . my name's Manny."

She nodded, and began to walk away. Then she paused to look back to him. "I'm Marie," she said, as quietly as she could.

"Good night, Marie. Sleep well."

From the diary of Marie Montero; Uriel 49, c.y. 06

Decided to start a diary today—this is my first entry. Found an old log-book in the bottom of the tool compartment while searching for something to help us clean grass from engine blades. Figure since we're going to be out on our own for a while, might as well keep a record of where we've gone and what we've done. Got to report in every other day, so it'll help me keep track of stuff. Wendy's been keeping a journal for years, seems to help her put everything in perspective (is that the right word?), so maybe if I do the same thing it'll help me, too.

Lars says I'm wasting time doing this, but I've got a lotta time to waste.

Just spent last two days making our way across New Florida—seen nothing but grass, grass, and more grass. Trees now and then, but it's pretty much the same thing: miles and miles of grass, tall as my chest. Every ten miles or so we have to stop because the stuff gets caught in the fans and clogs them up, so when the engines start to overheat Lars pulls over and then Manny and I have to get out and yank all that grass out of the cowlings while Lars waits for the engines to cool down. But when we're not doing that, the only thing I have to do is sit there. Lars won't let me drive, and he doesn't like it when I talk to Manny. So it's pretty boring.

Manny's not such a bad guy, once you get to know him. We chit-chat while we clear the engines, and he's told me a bit about himself. Turns out that he was once a poet, back on Earth almost eighty-five years ago. Even wrote a couple of books. But he got some sort of disease that caused his bones to lose calcium and deteriorate, so when he got a chance to download his mind into a quantum comp and become a savant, he took it. Hearing this makes me think he's a little more human than I thought . . . but then I remember that he used to be the Matriarch's #2 man, and I try to keep this in mind before I trust him too much.

Spent last night (our second) somewhere in the savannah. Close as we can tell from looking at the map, we're about two-thirds of the way to where North Creek and Boid Creek come together. Lars wanted to push on until we got there, but Manny told him that it wouldn't be smart to travel at night. There's a lot of stuff out here—tree stumps, ball plants, even boid nests—that we could run into even with the floodlights on. Lars finally listened to him and stopped, but the grass was too high for us to make camp without doing a lot of clearing, so instead we stayed aboard, laying out our sleeping bags on the deck and eating cold rations for dinner.

Didn't sleep well. Kept hearing boids all night. Manny stood watch again—nice to have someone who doesn't need to sleep and who can see in the dark—but I woke up once when I heard something moving through the grass pretty close to us. Looked up, saw Manny standing just a couple of feet from Lars and me. Bear was up high, so I could see him really well. He had his carbine raised to his shoulder and was aiming down at something I couldn't make out. He didn't fire, though, but just kept watching, and pretty soon I didn't hear the boid any more. Almost like it caught sight of Manny and decided not to mess with him.

Lars missed the whole thing. Just kept snoring away. Took me a while to shut my eyes again, though. When I woke up this morning, though, Manny didn't tell us what happened. He just gave us some cereal and sliced apples, and stood watch while Lars and I took turns to go off in the high grass to shit and pee. And then we were off again.

Made North Creek about two hours ago. Stopped to reinflate the pontoons, then hit the water and went south down it about five or six miles until we reached the junction of Boid Creek, where we turned W x NW and started heading toward West Channel. Feels good to be on the water again. Making time now that we don't have to stop to clear the fans.

Will use the satphone later to call back home, tell Carlos what we've seen so far. Which ain't much. Stupid idea, sending us out here to explore the world. Ha! Just grass, grass, and more grass.

* * *

They were on the fourth day of the trip, little more than ten miles from the West Channel, when Marie was nearly killed.

As Manny promised, the journey became faster once the Armadillo reached Boid Creek and was on the water again. Although they were traveling against the current, it didn't slow the skimmer very much, so long as Lars kept the engines at full throttle and remained in the center of the creek. They camped overnight on a sandbar just east of the confluence of the Alabama River, and the evening had passed uneventfully; once again, Manny stood watch while Lars and Marie slept in the tent.

The following morning, though, they awoke to find the sky overcast with iron-grey clouds. While the others had breakfast, Manny used the skimmer's comsat system to pull up a nowcast report from Liberty. Satellite images showed that a low-pressure front had rolled in from the west during the night, bringing with it a strong chance of storms. Back in the colonies, the change of weather wouldn't have mattered so much, but out here in the open . . .

"We should go as far as we can today," Manny said, "but we need to get off the water at the first sign of a thunderstorm."

"C'mon, what's a little rain?" Lars peered at him over the lip of his coffee mug. "You won't melt." Then he snickered. "Oh, wait, I forgot . . . you might draw lightning."

"If I happen to attract lightning, as unlikely as that may be, then you'll be the first to know. I sit behind you, remember?" Lars's smirk lapsed into a dark glower, and Manny went on. "It's not just lightning we have to worry about . . . if we get enough rain, we'll also have to be concerned about flash-floods. If that happens, we'd rather be on dry land, don't you think?"

Despite himself, Lars had to admit that the savant had a point. Until the storms actually came, though, there was no reason why they shouldn't keep moving. So they put out their fire, struck camp, loaded their equipment back aboard the skimmer, and continued down the narrow river, with Marie and Lars taking turns on the middeck to watch for signs of bad weather.

Yet, although the air became cooler and a few drops of rain occasionally pattered against the canopy, the storm never arrived. The clouds became thick and heavy, and shortly after midday Marie briefly spotted a blue-white lancet arcing between the sky and the ground. But the lightning strike was somewhere in the grasslands many miles to the south, so far away that, when the thunder finally arrived nearly a minute later, it was only a dull grumble. The front moved past them with little more than a vague threat of violence; by early afternoon, as they passed through the broad delta that marked the mouth of the Alabama River, the clouds were parted here and there to admit angular columns of pale yellow sunlight, ghostly stairways rising into the heavens.

Marie was in no mood to appreciate the sublime beauty of the moment; she had another problem to worry about. She didn't know whether it was anxiety or the diet of processed food—it had been two days since they'd had anything fresh to eat—but, regardless of the reason, she'd come down with a case of diarrhea. Since the beginning of the trip, she'd learned to

wait until they made rest stops along the way, but today her bowels refused to cooperate. The antacid tabs she'd found in the medkit didn't help much, and, during the hours while Lars was running the engines hard in an effort to get out from under the storm, she hadn't dared to ask him to pull over so that she could make a quick dash into the tall grass.

Yet her guts had begun to cramp painfully, and unless she wanted to relieve herself over the middeck rail, she had to do something fast. So as soon as they were past the Alabama River, she demanded that Lars make an emergency landing. No, they couldn't wait until they reached the coast; she had to go, right now. Lars grouched a bit, but one look at her face told him that she wasn't kidding. With a resigned shrug, he throttled down the engines and turned the Armadillo toward shore.

Marie was off the skimmer before Manny had a chance to lower the ramp. Scrambling down the ladder, she dropped into ankle-deep muck so thick that it threatened to pull her moccasins off her feet. Scowling as she grabbed at waterfruit vines for support, cursing with each bowlegged step she took, she clambered ashore, then scrambled up a muddy riverbank until she reached dry land. Then she plunged in the tall grass, searching for some place where she couldn't be seen from the skimmer.

A dozen yards from the creek, she found a spider-bush thicket high enough to afford her some privacy. Dropping her pants, she squatted behind it; relief was immediate and not a second too soon. Once she was done, she pulled up a handful of cloverweed and used it to clean herself, a trick she'd learned while in the Rigil Kent Brigade. Then she stood up and bent over to pull her pants up from around her ankles.

It was when she raised her head again that she spotted the boid.

The giant avian stood less than twenty yards away, silently watching her from the tall grass within which it was concealed. So perfectly did its tawny feathers match the color of the sourgrass, she might have missed seeing it entirely if something hadn't moved near its feet. Perhaps it was a swamper or a creek cat, but it distracted the boid just enough that it moved its head ever so slightly to watch it go.

She caught a glimpse of its enormous beak, absurdly parrot-like yet large enough to decapitate her with a single bite, and involuntarily sucked in her breath. The sound she made was sufficient to draw the boid's attention; its head swiveled on its thick neck, and once again its black, button-like eyes fastened upon her.

Fighting the urge to run, Marie forced herself to stare straight back at the creature. If it knew that it'd been seen, it wouldn't attack immediately, because boids preferred to stalk their prey and catch them unaware. Yet now that it knew that it had been spotted, the attack would be inevitable. The short, spike-like plumage on the top of the boid's skull lifted—it was an adult male, as if that mattered much just now—and it rocked back and forth upon its legs, almost as if it dared her to make a break for it.

Marie's mind raced, calculating her odds for survival. The distance between her and the boid was greater than the distance between her and the skimmer. Not much, but those few extra yards might make all the difference. If she ran as fast as she could, she might be able to reach the creek before it caught her. But boids were fast; their legs were longer

than her own, and they were accustomed to chasing down their prey and leaping upon them while they were . . .

Damn it! Too much thinking, and not enough action. "Aw, shit," she muttered, and then she turned and ran.

She might have had a good head-start, were it not for the spider-bush directly behind her. She'd forgotten about that. Swearing, she nearly charged headlong into it, and only barely managed to avoid being tangled within its thorny strands. Yet it cost her precious seconds; even as she dodged around the bush, she heard the boid screech, and knew without looking back that it was coming after her.

Air burned within her lungs as she raced for shore, her arms raised to swat aside the grass. The ground trembled slightly beneath her feet, and she instinctively knew that the boid had leaped over the thicket. Still, she refused to look back. The shore was close, very close; already she could see the skimmer's aerial, protruding against light grey clouds tinted orange-red by the afternoon sun, so heartachingly beautiful, and, in a moment of clarity, she regretted that this might be the last thing her eyes would ever see.

Oh god, oh god, oh god . . . oh dear lord, save me, I'll never do anything . . . oh god, please, I swear I'll . . .

A hot wind, stinking of decayed flesh, brushed against the back of her neck. A hard snap just behind her . . .

From somewhere to her left, the loud *poppa-poppa-poppa* of an automatic weapon. Looking around, she caught a glimpse of Manny standing in the tall grass only a few yards away, hood thrown back, carbine raised to his shoulders.

"Down!" he yelled.

The gun's muzzle moved in her direction, and she dove headlong for cover. She hit the ground face-first, hard enough to knock the wind from her lungs. Rolling over, Marie saw the boid towering above her. For a second, she thought this was the end, then she heard gunfire again. The boid staggered backward, red blood and grey brains spurting from a hole in its head big enough for her to stick her hand in. Gore spattered across her legs, then the creature toppled over, its taloned feet twitching as if, even in death, it was still trying to catch up with her.

Her mouth dry, her heart feeling as if it was about pound its way through her chest, Marie fell back against the trampled grass. A timeless time went by, then Manny loomed over her, a figure in black with a death's head for a face. He said something—it may have been *are you all right?* but she couldn't be sure, because his voice sounded scratchy and distant, as if it was a radio transmission from another world—and all she knew for certain was that she was drifting away to a dark, warm place, where there was no fear.

From the diary of Marie Montero: Uriel 52, c.y. 06 (extract)

When I came to, I was back aboard the skimmer. Manny [had] carried me back while Lars pulled anchor and started up the engines, so when I

woke up, I found that we were already underway. Manny'd laid me out on deck and pulled the awning over me, and when I woke up, I found that he'd put a wet cloth across my forehead.

Very weird, coming out of it like that. Don't even remember fainting. In fact, that's a first for me—fainting, that is—but Manny says it's not unusual, considering how close I came to buying it. I asked him how close the boid was when he shot it and at first he wouldn't tell me, but when I told him about the snap I heard, he said the snap was the boid trying to bite my head off. That's how close it was.

Manny told me he'd come ashore when he saw that I'd gone off without a rifle. He had a hunch there might be trouble. Glad he had that hunch, or I would've been lunch, ha ha. Not funny, I know . . . but right now, laughing is a lot better than crying, and I've done some of that already.

Lars got us downriver a mile or two, then stopped engines and came back to see how I was doing. He was worried, too . . . at least I think he was . . . but then he went off on me about going ashore unarmed, and that I shouldn't ever take a dump again without packing a gun. Then he told Manny we should've hauled the boid aboard and carved it up for food, because we could've gotten a good meal out of it. I had to laugh at that. Hell, I was downright hysterical. Told him that it would've tasted even better if I'd fattened it up a little bit. That got him pissed off. He went back to the cockpit and started the engines again, and didn't say anything to me after I returned to the bubble.

Lars means well, I know that. And he was right about going ashore without carrying a rifle to protect myself. But, dammit, I was almost killed back there, and he's mad about not getting some fresh meat from the carcass?!

At any rate, we made it to the end of Boid Creek by the end of the day, where we found the entrance to the West Channel. So far as we know, we're the first ones to see the western side of New Florida. From here, it's about five miles across the channel to Great Dakota; we can see river bluffs on the other shore, with deep forests and high mountains that look almost black rising in the distance. Totally different landscape from New Florida—sort of like Midland, except even more rugged. What a relief. I'm so sick of sourgrass, I could puke.

It was too late for us to cross that night, so we made camp on New Florida, on the north side of the mouth of Boid River. For once, Manny made Lars haul everything ashore and set up the tents—he wanted to spend the last hour or two of daylight surveying the area (taking pictures, setting up the theodolite and making measurements, using a plumb-line to estimate the water depth, etc.). Says this place could be a good site for a port town, some time in the future. Guess I can see that, maybe . . . but Manny sees things a lot different from us, I think.

I made dinner, but it wasn't very good . . . burned the beans and undercooked the chicken (in fact, I couldn't even eat the chicken—reminded me too much of what almost ate me). Lars bitched about having to do all the hard work, but Manny stayed quiet. He spent the time writing up the report to send home—I asked him not to mention what happened today [because] I didn't want Carlos to get worried—and when he was done I read

it over and let him transmit it. Then I crawled into the tent and tried to go to sleep.

Lars came in a while later. Pulled off his clothes and made me take off mine. Wanted to have sex. Wasn't in the mood, but I let him, because he insisted. Felt good for about a minute, but I [crossed out]. It seemed to satisfy him, though, because after he was done he rolled over and fell asleep.

Needed to pee, so I moved him aside, crawled out of the tent. Found Manny standing by the fire, looking out over the channel. He wanted to escort me while I went into the bushes, but I told him I'd be OK. No boid cries—everything was calm and quiet. I didn't go far, just to the edge of the water, but I never let him out of my sight. He turned his back, but I could tell from the way he held his gun that he was on alert.

When I was done he said goodnight and told me to have pleasant dreams. Before I went back to bed, I asked him what he was doing, i.e., what did he do all night while Lars and I were sacked out.

He said that he was writing poems.

Writing poems. I like that.

Although Marie, Lars, and Manny thought they were the first to navigate the southwest end of the West Channel, they soon learned they were wrong. Not long after the expedition crossed over from New Florida and began making its way down the east coast of Great Dakota, they unexpectedly came upon another group of explorers.

At Manny's insistence, Lars throttled down the engines and let the current carry them downstream. Although Lars was impatient to reach the Great Equatorial River, Manny wanted to take time to study the channel. When Marie agreed with the savant—after all, there was no reason for them to hurry—the pilot found himself outvoted. So while Lars fumed within the cockpit, Manny and Marie sat side by side on the middeck, legs dangling over the side, as they watched the river go by.

The day was pleasantly warm, with just a touch of autumn to the salt breeze wafting across the channel's dark blue expanse. Swoops circled above the faux-birch whose roots clung precariously to the edge of limestone bluffs rising above the river; now and then, channelmouth jumped from the water near the boat, as if frightened by the aliens who'd suddenly appeared in their midst. In the far distance, they could make out the highlands, enormous mountains so thickly forested with blackwood and rough bark that they looked as if they were made of charcoal, save for the rocky summits that towered above the tree line.

Great Dakota was breathtakingly beautiful, as awesome in its unspoiled majesty as the savannahs of New Florida had been menacing. For the first time since they'd left Liberty, they were able to relax. There was no sourgrass to battle though, no boids to watch out for. After a while, Marie and Manny stopped talking; instead they shared a quietude that was both respectful and intimate. Manny made notes in a datapad, but every so often he switched to the graphic-input function and used the tip of one of his claw-like fingers to render a quick sketch. Peering over his shoulder, Marie was surprised by the delicate lines he traced upon the

screen. Manny was not only a poet, but also an artist; it was easy to forget that he was a savant, a soul locked within a mechanical body.

Around midday, Lars stopped the engines. He came up top to drop anchor, then stomped across the middeck to the stern where, without apology, he opened his fly and urinated into the river. Marie had taken off her shirt and now wore only her bra; looking around to catch Lars staring at her breasts, she found herself feeling naked, and quickly pulled her shirt on again before going below to make lunch.

Left alone with Manny, Lars leaned against an engine cowling; he crossed his arms and silently regarded the savant for a long time, idly scratching at his beard but never once saying a word. Manny put away his datapad and stood up to face the channel; he was better at practicing stoicism than Lars, and after a while Lars turned and began plucking small blades of grass from the fans.

Marie came back up with sandwiches and some dried fruit; she and Lars ate in near silence, their only conversation some technical chatter regarding engine maintenance. Lars threw the rest of his sandwich overboard and watched a couple of channelmouth fight over it, then he stomped back across the deck, pulled up the anchor, and went back down the ladder.

Manny and Marie resumed their previous places on the deck. A few minutes later, the engines restarted and the skimmer began moving down the channel. Marie let out her breath, and for just a moment she heard the soft crackle from Manny's mouth grille that, in its own way, signified a sigh.

It was late in the afternoon when they spotted a thin tendril of smoke rising in the distance, from a point farther down the coast. At first Manny thought it was a forest fire caused by the storm that had passed over them the day before, but after a while he and Marie realized that it was too small to be natural in origin. Lars must have thought so, too, for suddenly the engines revved up and both of them had to grab the railing as the skimmer rose higher upon its pontoons and began to cruise down the river.

They were right: the source of the smoke was a campfire, set by people who'd already ventured down the West Channel. As they grew closer, the bluffs gradually disappeared until they came within sight of a broad, flat delta where an inland creek emptied into the channel. A pair of keelboats lay at anchor just offshore, their sails furled. Nearby were several catskin tents, their poles leaning haphazardly as if carelessly planted in the muddy soil. And it was clear that they'd been spotted as well, for several figures stood on the sandy beach, waving their arms above their heads as the skimmer approached them.

"Who do you think they are?" Marie had climbed down the ladder into the cockpit; now she stood behind Lars, gazing at the campsite through the bubble.

"Does it matter?" Lars throttled back the engines as he turned the yoke toward shore. "First people we've seen in almost a week. Probably the only guys we're going to see this side of New Florida." He grinned. "Time to go over and say howdy."

"We're not supposed to make contact with anyone." Unnoticed by either of them, Manny had followed Marie belowdecks. "That's the condition of our . . ."

"Shut up, Robby." Lars shoved down the throttle bars. The fans growled as the engines reverse-propped; the skimmer's bow rose slightly upon the crest of its own wake. "Ain't a colony, is it? So we can meet 'em if we want to." He glanced back at the savant. "And since when did you become boss?"

Marie kept her silence. Already, two men were wading out into the shallows, preparing to grab hold of the skimmer and help tow it ashore. Their beards were long and unkempt, their clothes ragged and patched together. Upon the beach, several more men and women stared at them; although a couple held up their hands in greeting, she saw no welcoming smiles.

"He might be right," she murmured, feeling a forbidding chill. "Maybe we should . . ."

"Look, it's just for a little while, okay?" Lars cut the engines, let their momentum carry the skimmer the rest of the way ashore. "Sides, we gotta make camp soon anyway. Why not with these guys?" He stared at her. "Anything wrong with that?"

"No . . . no, I guess not." Her voice was meek. "It's just that . . ."

"Yeah, well, hold that thought." Lars pushed himself out of his seat, then slid between her and Manny, practically shoving them out of the way in his haste to get topside. "Need to drop anchor before this heap drifts away."

Manny watched him as he scampered up the ladder. "Who knows?" he said quietly. "Maybe seeing someone else might do him some good."

Marie could already hear men clambering up the sides of the skimmer. Recalling stories of Caribbean pirates she'd heard when she was very young, it wasn't hard to visualize them with bandanas tied around their heads and daggers clenched within their teeth.

"Stay with me," she whispered. "Please, whatever you do . . . just stay with me."

From the diary of Marie Montero: Uriel 53, c.y. 05 (extract)

Stopping was a mistake. We should've stayed away, just waved and kept going. But Lars insisted, and Manny thought it might be good for him if he saw someone else besides just him and me. But if I could take it back, somehow run back the clock, we would've never set foot on the beach.

I was nervous about these people from the get-go, especially the way a couple of their guys climbed aboard without so much as a how-do. I didn't like the way they looked at me, like I was fresh meat they'd love to skewer. But Manny really put the spook on them . . . the last thing they expected to see was a Savant, not to mention one with a rifle in his hands, so they calmed down a bit once we came ashore, and introduced themselves as politely as they could.

Turns out they're a group from New Boston, about three hundred miles

N x NE from where we found them. Twenty-seven in all, mostly men, although there's also a few women and a couple of children. They built the boats themselves and set out from Midland to explore the West Channel, mainly to see if they could find a location for a new settlement. They'd been on the river for about three weeks when we happened upon them, and they were just as surprised to see us as we were to see them.

That warned me right then and there that something was wrong. New Boston isn't a major colony, but it's well-off enough that no one ought to want to leave it to go exploring, or at least not in the last month of summer, with autumn just ahead. And these guys seem to have just enough to get by on . . . just a few patched-up tents and some hand-me-down equipment that'd seen better days. Even their guns are old Union Guard flechette rifles left over from the war, and they didn't have but a few of those. Like they'd just grabbed whatever they could get their hands on before they shipped out.

But they've got plenty of booze. About six kegs of sourgrass ale, along with a few jugs of bearshine that they said they'd been saving for a special occasion. Soon as Lars heard that, I knew we were staying for the night, whether Manny or I liked it or not.

At least their leader is someone I can trust. Woman by the name of Chris Smith—guess it's short for Christine, although almost everyone calls her Missus Smith. Big lady, with arms that look like they could yank the wings off a boid. Real no-nonsense attitude. When one of the guys started to get a little frisky with me, she stepped in and stared him down. He backed off right quick, and after that the others decided to look but not touch. At least for a while.

They got a bonfire started shortly after sunset, and a couple of guys fried some redfish they caught this morning. For a while, it wasn't so bad: just a bunch of people, chowing down around the campfire and swapping stories about what we've seen and done since we left home. Lars didn't tell anyone exactly why we'd left Liberty, and none of them told us exactly why they'd left New Boston, but after a while I got the feeling that the reasons were pretty much the same. These people were too ornery for the place where they'd come from, and someone had told them to hit the road and not come back.

Well, good enough. But then a few of the men got into serious drinking, and that was when I noticed that the rest, including all the women and children, began making themselves scarce. The only woman who stayed behind was Missus Smith. She parked herself on a log next to me, and I noticed that her right hand never strayed far from the big hunting knife she kept in a scabbard on her belt.

Manny was there, too. Although no one liked having him around—all through dinner, he had to put up with stuff like "Hey, where'd you get the pet robot?" and "Maybe we can break him down for spare parts"—he never left my side, and stood behind me while we ate. He said nothing, and after a while people pretty much forgot he was there.

So it was Manny and Missus Smith who saved me from getting gang-raped, because I have no doubt that's what would've happened if they hadn't been there. I was tired, and about ready to head for our tent, when Lars

happened to remark that we hadn't brought any liquor of our own, and would anyone consider making a trade for a jug of bearshine.

Someone suggested that they'd swap a jug for one of our carbines, but Lars shook his head and told him that we only had two and we needed both of them. Another guy said that he'd settle for our satphone, and for a moment I thought Lars would actually do that, so I said that we needed it, too, no thanks. And then someone else—a skinny guy named James—said that he'd trade up for a night with me.

Lars looked at him. Then he looked at me. Then he looked at the jug James was holding out. And then he just shrugged and said, "Sure, why not?"

At first I thought he was joking. I mean, there was a smile on his face when he said this. But then James said, "All right, it's a deal" and then he stood up and started toward me. "Let's go, honey-doll. We got a big night ahead of us."

That's when I knew he wasn't kidding. He meant to drag me off to his tent and . . . well, you can guess the rest. And not only that, but since his pals stood up as well, it was pretty clear that James wouldn't mind having company. Lars did nothing to stop them, though. James handed him the jug, and Lars pulled out the cork and treated himself to a big swig of corn liquor. Didn't even look at me.

Chris stood up and pulled out her knife. "No deal," she said. "Everyone just stay put and no one gets hurt." But they didn't back down. After all, she was outnumbered at least six to one. No matter how tough she might be, there's no way she could take them all at once.

Then there was a shot behind us, and I knew without looking that Manny had fired his gun in the air. Everyone jumped except for Lars, who just stayed where he was, cool as can be, while Manny lowered the gun and pointed it straight at James.

No one said a word, but James and his posse backed off. They went back to where they'd been sitting, and for a couple of minutes no one said anything. Then someone remarked that Bear had come up and didn't it look pretty tonight, and pretty soon everyone was back to talking about the weather and fishing and what-else, as if nothing had happened.

Chris didn't sit down, though, and she didn't put her knife away. She nudged me with her elbow and cocked her head toward the skimmer. That was all the advice I needed. I stood up and, with Manny beside me, walked back to where we'd beached the skimmer. I didn't breathe easy until I'd climbed back aboard, and didn't feel safe until I went belowdecks.

I'm sleeping in the skimmer tonight, with the hatch shut and Manny standing watch topside, as he'd done while we were still on New Florida. It's not boids he's on the lookout for, though, but James and his buddies. Lars hasn't returned and I hope he doesn't. Looking through the cockpit at the bonfire, I can hear him: laughing, singing, getting drunk. Not a care in the world.

Sure know how to pick 'em, don't I?

Lars seemed to remember nothing of what had happened the night before. When Marie saw him again the following morning, his clothes were

grimy from having slept on the beach next to the bonfire. His breath reeked of alcohol, and he claimed to have no recollection of attempting to trade her for a jug of bearshine. So far as he was concerned, all he'd done was have a little party with some newfound friends. But Marie couldn't help but notice that he was unable to look her in the eye, or that he avoided having anything to do with Manny.

She wanted to leave at once, as did Manny. While Lars stumbled off toward the latrine, the other two of them packed up their gear. Much to her surprise, nothing appeared to be missing; the fact that they'd left most of their equipment aboard the skimmer probably had something to do with this. The half-dozen men who'd stayed up all night were still sleeping off their hangovers; those who were awake studiously avoided Marie and Manny while they disassembled the tent and rolled up the sleeping bags, yet just as they were about to carry everything to the skimmer, Chris Smith came over to them.

"Just wanted to say I'm sorry about what happened last night." Like Lars, she had trouble looking at Marie, and instead gazed at the smoldering remains of the bonfire. "What James said and did was . . ." Her voice trailed off, and she shook her head. "Look, it's no way to treat a guest, let's put it that way."

"No, it wasn't." Marie was tempted to turn her back on Missus Smith until she saw how embarrassed the woman was. "Appreciate you standing up for me," she added, her tone softening. "Would've been worse if you hadn't."

"Yeah, well . . ." Straightening her broad shoulders, she turned to look at the nearby tents. "My fault. James and his boys seem to think they run the show here. They tried this once before with some of the other women. I put it down then, thought it wouldn't happen again. If I'd known it would, I would've warned you." She hesitated. "Besides, I thought your man would've . . . I mean, that he would have defended you, not . . ."

"You're no more surprised than I am." Marie turned to look in the direction Lars had gone. Through the brush that marked the edge of the campsite, she saw him standing at the edge of the latrine pit, his back turned to them as he relieved his bladder. As she watched, he abruptly collapsed to his hands and knees; even from that distance, she could hear gagging sounds as everything in his stomach forced its way up through his throat. No longer did he resemble the guerrilla fighter with whom she'd fallen in love. Instead he was a pathetic drunk. All of a sudden, she realized how much she had come to despise him.

"If I could leave him behind," she murmured, "I'd do so in a heartbeat."

Chris quietly regarded her a moment. "Got a minute?" she asked at last. "Or are you in a hurry to get out of here?" Marie looked back at her, and Missus Smith nodded toward the water's edge. "Take a walk with me, sister. I got a proposition for you."

Marie glanced at Manny. The savant nodded, then reached forward to take the folded tent from her. As Manny carried their equipment to the skimmer, Chris led Marie down the beach, away from the campsite.

"You probably figured out by now that we're not your usual settlers," Chris said once they were out of earshot of anyone else. "Fact is, most of

us are here 'cause we got fed up with New Boston. It's become an iron town ever since they found the Gillis lode, and these people aren't the kind who want to spend their lives down in some mine with pick-axes in their hands. So we gathered up what little we could and sailed off down the channel, looking for some place to start our own colony."

"Makes sense. We've had people like that leave Liberty since the war was over."

"I know. I was in Forest Camp during the occupation, working on the bridge project. So's most everyone else here. When Rigil Kent blew up the bridge, we headed north and started New Boston. So we're used to cutting timber, not digging holes. But . . ." She shrugged. "Well, lately I've begun to wonder just how serious some of these guys really are."

"I don't understand."

Missus Smith stopped and turned toward the beach. "Take a look around, tell me what you see." Without waiting for Marie to respond, she pointed inland. "I'll tell you what I see. Plenty of dry land past the beach, with a freshwater river leading down from the mountains. No boids to worry about . . . they're all on the other side of the channel. And up there in the hills, all the wood you could possibly want. Good, solid timber, too . . . not just blackwood and faux-birch like on New Florida, but rough bark and mountain briar as well. With some work, this place could become a major settlement."

In her mind's eye, Marie perceived the place as Chris imagined it: not as a broken-down fishing camp, but as a thriving frontier colony. And she had a point. Most of Liberty, and much of Midland on the other side of the Eastern Channel, had already been deforested during the Union effort to build the Garcia Narrows Bridge. Although this place was farther away from Liberty than Forest Camp, she'd already glimpsed the vast, untouched wilderness of Great Dakota. There was potential here, no doubt about it.

"Have you talked about this with anyone else?" she asked.

Missus Smith let out her breath as a dry snort. "Sure I have. We've been here nearly two weeks, y'know. And a few of us see it as I do. But James and his bunch . . ." She absently kicked a clump of beach grass in frustration. "Should've never let them get into the booze. Hell, if I'd known they'd turn into a bunch of drunks, I'd never have let 'em bring it in the first place. Now all they want to do is drink and fish, and half the time they're too messed up to fish. Like this is some sort of vacation."

She looked at Marie. "Last night was the final straw," she went on, more quietly now. "I've had it with 'em. No more parties, no more trying to gang-bang anyone with tits. So I'm cutting 'em loose."

Marie stared at her. "You can do that?"

"Sure, I can." A grim smile. "Second day out from New Boston, when we made camp on the north shore of New Florida, James and I had a little disagreement about who was in charge. So we had an election, winner take all. I won. And believe me, I can make it stick. Maybe you didn't see it last night, but there's a lot of people among us who are just as sick and tired of him and his pals as I am." Missus Smith patted the knife on her hip for effect. "If I tell em to go, then they'll go."

"Sure, but . . . where'd they go?"

"I don't care." She pointed to the two keelboats anchored near the skimmer. "They can take either one of the boats . . . both are in good condition. Load up their tents and take the booze with 'em, and head any which way they choose. North, east, west, south . . . wherever they can get the news. So long as they're not hanging around here, causing trouble."

She paused. "If you want to get rid of your man," she said, very quietly, "here's your chance. I saw what he tried to do last night. He would've pimped your ass for a jug of bearshine. Whatever caused you to light out for the country with him is none of my business, but . . ."

"I know." Marie looked back at camp. Lars was nowhere to be seen, yet she felt his presence nonetheless, and it gave her a chill. Sometime in the last week, the tough-minded yet easy-going guy whom she'd met during the Revolution had disappeared. Perhaps he'd never been there in the first place; all she'd seen was what she had wanted to see. Yet the fact remained that, from the moment they'd left Liberty, all he'd given her was heartache and misery. Two days ago, he'd shown no remorse when she'd been attacked by a boid. And last night . . .

"Can Manny stay?" she asked abruptly.

"The savant?" Chris thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. "I'm not crazy about those kind, but if you really insist. . ."

"I mean it. If I stay, he stays, too." She hesitated. "Look, he saved my life. Twice now, in fact."

"Yeah, yeah, all right." Missus Smith smiled. "He's handy with a gun, I'll give him that much." Then her smile faded, and her expression became more serious. "So, are you with us? Or do you want to take your chances with Lars? Tell me now, because I need to know where you stand."

Marie took a deep breath. "I'm with you."

"Good." Missus Smith clapped her on the shoulder. "Glad to have you with us. Now let's go and read 'em the riot act."

Lars didn't take Marie seriously at first. Even when she climbed aboard the skimmer to throw his belongings on the beach, he seemed to think she was simply having a fit; he stood nearby with his arms crossed, a knowing smirk on his face. It was not until Missus Smith told him to pick up his gear and carry it to the closer of the two keelboats that he realized this wasn't a joke. He was being expelled, along with the New Boston colonists who'd been at last night's drinking party.

His disbelief quickly turned to anger, as did everyone else's being forced to leave. Yet Missus Smith had the upper hand; she'd already spread the word to all those in camp who were tired of being bullied by James and his cronies, and they'd decided the time had come to stand up for themselves. They'd shown up with guns, machetes, tree branches, anything that could be used as a weapon. Seeing that he and his pals were outnumbered, James tried to bargain with her, making promises that they'd behave from now on, but Missus Smith remained firm. James's group would be given one of the boats and a fair share of the supplies, including a couple of flechette rifles and a satphone in case of an emergency. They could take the rest of the ale and bearshine, too. Yet there was no ques-

tion that they were being sent their own way, or that Lars was going with them.

Lars became ugly. Red-faced, stamping at the ground like a petulant child, he heaped foul words upon Marie, calling her things that, until now, she'd never imagined that he could think about her. Perhaps it was only the heat of the moment, but it was then that she realized for the first time that he'd never really loved her; she'd been little more than a toy he'd found, useful for sex and little else. Truth be told, she'd felt much the same way about him, too; the events of the past several days, though, had shown her that Lars was only a mannish boy who thought of no one but himself.

Nonetheless, his last words to her stung the most. "You can't get along without me," he said as he bent down to pick up his sleeping bag. "You know it, too."

"Yes, I can." She fought to keep her expression stolid, yet tears welled in the corners of her eyes. "I don't need you."

"Yeah, you do. You'd be dead by now if it wasn't for me." He looked past her toward Manny. The savant stood a few yards away, carbine in his hands. "Who you gonna depend on now, that thing? Hell, it ain't nothing more'n a two-legged can opener."

"He saved my life. And he didn't try to trade me for a jug of booze. More than I can say for you."

"No?" Lars slung the pack over his shoulder, tucked the bag under his arm. "Let's see him keep you warm at night, then." An ill-humored grin split his face. "Hell, I'd pay good money to see that. Might be as much fun as watching you and James . . ."

She stepped forward and slapped him across the face. The blow was harder than she meant it to be; that, or he simply didn't see it coming. Either way, he staggered back, almost tripping over his own feet as the sleeping bag fell from his arms. His eyes were wide with astonishment, his cheek reddened where she'd struck him, and, although his mouth opened, for a moment he was speechless.

Behind him, a couple of men from James's group snickered. Someone muttered something that Marie didn't catch, but Lars apparently did. The swollen corner of his upper lip curled, and Lars started toward her, dark fury in his eyes.

"That's enough," Missus Smith said. Hearing a low click to her left, Marie looked around. Missus Smith had raised her rifle and was pointing it straight at Lars. "Any closer, and so help me I'll put an end to you."

"Chris. . ."

"Hush." Missus Smith didn't look away from Lars. "No more words. You're done here. Pick up your stuff and get on the boat. Now."

Lars said nothing. He leaned over to retrieve his sleeping bag, now laying unrolled upon the sand like a dead worm. For a moment, Marie thought he'd mutter a last curse or threat, but Lars surprised her by remaining silent. Instead, he quietly slung the bag over his shoulder, turned away from them and marched down the beach to the keelboat.

James was waiting for him. The two men spoke for a few seconds, then James swatted him on the shoulder and let Lars climb aboard. Two other

men shoved the boat backward into the surf, then were hauled over the side by their companions. The morning tide pulled the craft out into the channel, and the people on shore watched as the seven outcasts hoisted sails and tacked into the wind. Within minutes, they were gone, sailing southwest toward the Great Equatorial River.

"Good riddance," Missus Smith said quietly. "With any luck, we've seen the last of 'em."

Marie raised a hand to wipe away the tears sliding down her face. For the first time since they'd met, she was free of Lars. And yet, despite all reason not to do so, she knew they'd meet again.

From the journals of Wendy Gunther: Uriel 54, c.y. 06

We heard from Marie today—not a mission report, but a real-time call via satphone. I was on duty at the hospital, but Carlos was home when she called. He spoke with her, and told me about it once I got home. By then he'd calmed down a little, but the conversation clearly upset him.

In short: Marie has left Lars. Or rather, she's made him leave her. She told Carlos that Lars had become abusive since they left Liberty, to the point that he'd almost allowed her to get killed a few days ago—a run-in with a boid that, for some reason, she hadn't mentioned in her last report. It seems that matters came to a head two nights ago after they crossed the West Channel, when they met up with a group from New Boston who'd made camp on Great Dakota. Apparently some of these people were rather . . . well, unpleasant, to put it mildly . . . but they had plenty of liquor, and Lars went on a binge with them.

Carlos says that his sister wasn't very specific about what occurred next, but apparently something occurred that gave her reason to become afraid of what Lars might do if he remained with her. And that was enough for her, and for the rest of the people in the camp; the next morning, their leader told the troublemakers to get lost, and to take Lars with them. Whatever Lars did, it must have been pretty bad, because Carlos said Marie broke down while she was talking to him.

So Lars is gone, and Marie and Manny have elected to stay for a while on Great Dakota, helping the rest of the group establish a new settlement. Although Carlos is relieved that Marie hasn't been hurt and that she's no longer with Lars—so am I; neither of us ever liked him very much—he's also angry that she's broken the conditions of her parole, i.e., that she and Lars were to explore as much of Coyote as they could during the next six months, and to avoid contact with any other colonists. On the other hand, realistically speaking, there's not much we can do to stop her, short of sending a couple of blueshirts out in a gyro to pick her up and bring her home. And what good would that accomplish?

We've discussed the situation with the magistrates, and come to agree that, at least for the time being, we just should wait and see what happens. If Marie and Manny have located a prime location for a new colony—and from what she's told Carlos, Great Dakota could become a major timber resource—then it's probably best that they explore it with others. After all,

they're the first people to cross the West Channel; the other side is wilderness no one else has seen before. So it makes no sense for them to go at this alone when they've found other people who share the same objectives.

As for Lars . . . well, that was a tough call. One of the rules we'd set out was that they were to stay together, with Manny as their guide. Marie broke that rule when she allowed the New Boston group to expel him. We've talked this over with Clark Thompson. As much as he loves his nephew, he and Molly are aware of Lars' problems—especially his drinking—and he knows how much trouble he can cause. On the other hand, he's upset that Marie allowed him to be cut loose. He thinks Manny had something to do with this, even though Carlos told him that this was apparently Marie's decision, and he seems to believe that Lars should have been allowed to stay. But again, he knows there's not much he can do about it, so all he can do is hope that Lars will reappear sooner or later, and that by then Marie will have forgiven him for whatever he did.

Carlos is worried sick about his little sister. Maybe she's not so little anymore, but nonetheless he remembers when they were kids and he always had to look out for her. He's felt responsible for her ever since their folks were killed a few days after we arrived on Coyote and the two of them became orphans. (I had the same problem, of course, but since I didn't know my father very well, the situation was different for me.) When I got home, I found him gathering his outback gear. He planned to enlist a gyro pilot to fly him out west so he could track down Marie. I talked him out of it, but he's still pacing the floor.

So now Marie is on her own, or at least without Lars. Well, maybe that's the way it was meant to be. But there's one thing that still puzzles me. In her reports, she seldom mentions Manny. Wonder why that is?

With the camp's population reduced by one-fourth, the first days without those seven men were the hardest. Although several weeks remained before the autumn equinox, it was clear that Coyote's long summer was drawing to a close; the days were beginning to get cooler, the nights a little longer. If the twenty-two remaining men, women, and children—who now included Marie and Manny—wished to settle Great Dakota, they would have to prepare for the hard, cold months that lay ahead. Cabins needed to be built, along with outhouses, storage sheds, and greenhouses; autumn crops had to be planted, firewood cut and stockpiled; those and a dozen other tasks that James and his crew, who'd been among the hardest of the original group, had ignored in favor of drinking and sport fishing.

Now that they were gone, though, there was nothing left to distract the others from the serious business of homesteading. Two nights after Lars left, Missus Smith called to order a town meeting, held after dinner around the community fire pit. After it was decided that the settlement would incorporate itself as Riverport, pending approval of the Colonial Council, an election was held for the town mayor. To no one's surprise, Missus Smith ran unopposed.

When Chris presented a motion formally inviting Marie and Manny to become town members, Marie was stunned to find the vote was unani-

mous in their favor. Perhaps she'd been an outcast in Liberty, but in Riverport she was a fellow citizen. Nor did anyone make an issue of the fact that Manuel Castro was a savant, even though almost everyone was aware that he'd once been the lieutenant governor of the New Florida colonies during the Union occupation. All the same, Marie was struck by the irony that Riverport's mayor shared her first name with Liberty's Chief Proctor: one had welcomed her with open arms, while the other had thrown her in the county jail.

"You two aren't the only ones with a past," Chris said to her after the meeting was over. "Everyone here's running from something." Then she smiled and patted her on the shoulder. "Look, you've got a clean slate. Whatever you or Manny did is over and done. So forget about it, okay? Time to start fresh."

And so she did. Over the course of the next several weeks, Marie joined the effort to transform Riverport from a squalid collection of tents into something that resembled a frontier settlement. It was hard work, relentless and seldom pleasant. Once the camp was relocated from the beach to higher ground beside the nearby river, an adjacent stand of faux-birch was designated as timber for the construction of permanent structures. Her first task of the day usually involved helping the men cut down trees and strip them of branches. They lashed ropes around the trunks and dragged them to where cabins would be built. After lunch, she'd help the women and children clear a nearby meadow for the crops that would eventually be planted. And if there was any time left in the day, she collected firewood, washed clothes, cleaned fish, did some of the cooking, and whatever else needed to be done.

Although Manny wasn't strong enough to offer much assistance in the more grueling chores—despite appearances, his mechanical body wasn't meant for hard labor—he proved to be an able architect and civil engineer, designing not only cabins, but viaducts and sewage systems. He performed water-table measurements that accurately predicted the locations for artesian wells, and once he learned less physically demanding crafts such as carpentry and fishing, he turned out to be adept at them as well. Logs shaved and trimmed beneath his tireless hands had precise fittings; the trotlines he rigged every morning produced enough channelmouth, redfish, and brownhead to feed everyone by day's end.

For the first couple of weeks, Marie and Manny saw little of each other. She shared a tent with another woman whose former companion had been among those who'd been expelled, while Manny stayed aboard the skimmer. Although it had been beached, he made sure that its engines remained in proper operating condition. Their work schedules seldom coincided; when she was with the timber crew, he was helping build cabins, and when she was planting seed for corn, wheat, and radishes, he cut bait for the trotlines. Yet as time went on and they became accustomed to their duties, the two found opportunities to talk.

As before, when they'd been on the river, Marie found herself amazed by his insights. Even with only one functional eye, little escaped Manny's notice. He was intrigued by the seasonal migration of sea-swoops toward their breeding grounds in the distant Meridian Archipelago; day by day,

he counted their numbers, taking note of how many birds were in each flock that passed overhead, and how that indicated the coming of autumn. He also followed gradual changes in the night sky, the way bright stars like Arcturus and Canopus seemed to rise a little earlier every evening. One afternoon they all witnessed a solar eclipse, when Bear passed between Coyote and 47 Ursae Majoris; it happened often enough that Marie had long-since become accustomed to such events, but Manny pointed something out to her that she'd never really noticed before. The winds rose from the east at the beginning of the eclipse, abruptly died off during totality, then rose again from the west during the end. Just one more thing she'd taken for granted, yet which fascinated him.

Indeed, Manny was everything that Lars hadn't been. He was always gentle, never raising his voice to her, and although he was gifted with vastly superior intelligence, not once did he ever condescend to her. She found solace in his presence, and found herself longing for his company when he wasn't around. In time she forgot almost entirely about Lars, except to occasionally wonder what he'd do once his pals ran out of booze, and whether that meant he'd reappear to make her life miserable again.

Lars's departure had one unforeseen side effect. Although Missus Smith used the skimmer's satphone to transmit a formal petition to the Colonial Council for ratification of Riverport as a colony, the motion failed in the executive committee by a vote of 4-3. When Marie asked why this happened, Carlos told her that the dissenting vote had come from Clark Thompson. Lars's uncle was still angry about his nephew's expulsion. In his capacity as an influential committee member, he didn't want to do anything that might result in vital materials being shipped to the fledgling settlement. So until Lars reappeared, if ever, Riverport was nothing more than a squatter camp unrecognized by the Coyote Federation. Petty politics, really, but the only alternative was to make contact with James's group and beg them to return. Chris was firmly opposed to that idea, and so was Marie.

Yet even that was little more than a nuisance. Once the crops were planted, Marie found more opportunities to spend time with Manny. By then he was beginning to survey the nearby forests. In her desire to find reasons for the Council to recognize Riverport, Missus Smith wanted to make a case for Riverport becoming a major source of timber for all the colonies, and she'd put Manny in charge of scouting out the nearby woodlands. Marie and Manny would follow the river upstream into the foothills, then hike upward through dense forests of rough bark and swoop's nest briar until they reached a granite bluff upon a steep ridge overlooking town. This lonely spot on Thunder Ridge became a favorite place for them to rest—although Manny didn't really need to do so, he never forgot that she wasn't a savant—and compare notes on what they'd found.

The fifth day of Adnachiel was surprisingly warm, at least for the first week of autumn. Behind them rose the rocky summits of the Black Mountains, forbidding in their stark majesty. A few miles to the east lay the broad expanse of the West Channel, bright sunlight sparkling upon its cool blue waters. Manny sat cross-legged upon the bluff, sketching the

view upon his pad. Marie lay on her side, quietly observing the delicate way his forefinger traced the river upon the pad's opaque plate.

A notion occurred to her, and she reached forward to tap his arm. "Hey, do you ever draw people?"

His head swiveled toward her. He'd pulled back his robe's cowl, so she saw his face clearly. Although it remained expressionless, there was something in the way that he tilted his head that caused her to imagine a wry grin. "On occasion," he replied. "No one has ever posed for me, though, so I have to do it when they're not looking."

"I'll pose." She smiled. "I'd love to have a picture of me."

The metallic buzz from his mouth grill that she'd come to recognize as laughter. "Certainly. It'd be my honor." He shifted around so that he faced her, propping his pad on one raised knee. "How would you like to . . . ?"

"I'll show you." Grasping the bottom of her shirt, she pulled it over her head in one swift motion. She reached behind her back and unsnapped her bra. Tossing it aside, she shook out her hair, then stretched out upon the granite, feeling its cool, gritty texture against her skin.

"Like this," she said, her voice soft and low.

Manny stared at her, his right hand poised above the pad. He said nothing for a few moments, then he lowered his head. "Please put your shirt back on."

"It's all right." Marie gave him a shy smile. "No one can see me but you." She paused. "I don't want anyone but you to see me."

Manny put the pad aside, and said nothing for a few seconds. "Whatever it is you want from me," he said at last, "I can't give it to you."

"You already have. You're my friend. . . ."

"Then be my friend, and . . ." He stopped, slowly raising his head. "Marie, have you ever wondered why I became a savant? Why I chose to have my mind scanned, downloaded into *this*?"

Raising his right claw, he tapped it against his chest, where his quantum comp lay. A dull, metallic clank, like a fork rattling against an empty skillet. "Because I was ill. In fact, I was ill all my life. The only part of me that was healthy was my brain. The rest . . . I spent my life in a wheelchair, with a respirator tube running up my nose and a nurse pushing me around."

"Manny . . ."

"Just listen, please." The afternoon sun reflected off the ruby orb of his left eye, turning it into a jewel. "I never walked on my own. I never ran, or played games with other children, or did anything that I couldn't do with my hands. Or at least my right hand . . . the left never worked very well." He paused. "And, no, I've never been with a woman, if that's what you're thinking."

Suddenly, the day felt cold, as if summer had abruptly come to an end. "I'm sorry," she said, sitting and reaching for her shirt. "I didn't mean to . . ."

"No, of course you didn't." He shook his head. "I know all about cruelty, and that wasn't your intent." Again, the short buzz. "Misplaced flirtation, perhaps, but not cruelty. But seeing you this way . . . well, the gesture is appreciated, but it's also one of those things I've tried not to think about."

Marie slowly nodded. Neglecting her bra, she hastily pulled the shirt

over her head. "Please forgive me. I just . . ." She sighed, looked away. "Hell, I don't know what I was thinking."

"I know. Just an impulse." Then he hesitated, a little longer this time. "One thing, though . . . something I noticed when you were . . . shall we say, disrobed?"

She laughed at the diplomatic way he chose his words. "You mean when I was half-naked and trying to play sex kitten?"

"If you wish." Another pause. "It wasn't until you took off your shirt that I was certain of something I've observed before. Your breasts have become larger."

Marie stared at him. As busy as she'd been over the past several weeks, she hadn't been paying close attention to herself. Now that he mentioned it, though, she realized that her brassieres had become a bit uncomfortable lately. And although she'd eaten as well as anyone in camp could, given the fact that they were living on a diet of fish, waterfruit, rice, and beans, there were mornings when she'd been unable to keep anything in her stomach.

"Oh, god," she murmured. "Don't tell me what I think you're telling me."

"I'm not telling you anything. Only let me ask a personal question." He hesitated. "When was the last time you had your period?"

From the diary of Marie Montero: Adnachiel 5, c.y. 06

I'm pregnant.

Yeah, I'm sure. Found a test stick in the med kit. Peed on it, watched it turn red. You know the saying: stick turns green, a virgin you've been, stick turns red, you've been naughty in bed. Ha-ha. Not so funny now.

Looking back, I think I've known for a while, but was trying not to admit it to myself. All the signs were there: morning sickness, cold sweats, craving for fish and sweets, tits getting bigger and more sensitive. And, of course, that period I missed a couple of weeks ago. But it took Manny to make me see what I didn't want to see.

Don't know how I could've been so stupid. We brought pills, of course—they were in the med kit, too—but for some reason I forgot to take them. Maybe it was because I wasn't having sex with Lars. But that night when he forced himself on me . . . well, that must have done the trick. So now I'm knocked up, and . . .

[Passage deleted]

Don't know how to feel about this. Angry at Lars for getting me in this position (or any other position, ha-ha—sorry, another bad joke) but also at myself for being so careless. But also scared. Last thing I need right now is worrying about having a baby.

Manny and I talked it over tonight, aboard the skimmer where we wouldn't be overheard. He let me have a good cry and once I got it out of my system he gave me a cloth to dry my tears. Then we discussed what I should do.

He figures that I'm about four or five weeks pregnant. Means I'll be due in about two and a half months Coyote-time. So I should expect to have the

baby by the end of the year, sometime between Hanael 45 and New Year's Day.

Abortion is out of the question. Even if I wanted to do that . . . and I don't, 'cuz it's against my principles . . . there's no one here to perform the procedure. Not safely, at least, and I refuse to let anyone get near me who doesn't know what they're doing. And even tho' the med kit has pregnancy strips and contraceptive pills, for some dumb reason there's no whoops-silly-me pills.

Leaves me with two choices. Stay here in Riverport, and have the baby in a town that's going to have a rough time getting through winter as is without having one more mouth to feed, or pack up and head back to Liberty where there's a half-decent clinic and a sister-in-law who's used to delivering babies.

Might think the choice is obvious, but it's not. For one thing, I'm still in exile. If I go back, I'd have to fill out my sentence. That means the baby gets born in jail, with Mama going off to the road crew every morning. Even if the maggies cut me some slack, I'll still go back to being the bad apple no one wants around, not even my own brother. Just some stupid girl who got preggers and had to crawl home with a baby in her belly, looking for mercy and hoping that someone would take her in. If I'm lucky, someone will take pity on me and give me a job washing dishes or something.

But here, I'm a respected member of the community. No one cares about what I once was or what I once did 'cuz just about everyone else here has something in their past, too. Sometimes it seems like we're just getting by, but today we finished putting a roof on another cabin. Even if it leaks, it's a place someone can live, not just some crappy tent. That means something . . . and dammit, I like having a life that means something!

I want my child to grow up the same way.

Manny says I don't have to rush into this. The pregnancy is still early, so I've got some time to decide what to do. We're not telling Chris or anyone else what's going on until I figure things out. Hope she'll forgive me, but I'm not ready to pop the news just yet.

I'm scared. Goddamn, but I'm scared. Least I don't have Lars around, though. Sure, he's the other half of this problem, but I remember what he did to me and I don't want him being the father of my child.

Where is he, anyway?

They heard from Lars two days later.

The satphone transmission might have been missed if Manny hadn't been aboard the skimmer, using its side-looking radar to verify the topographical estimates of the maps he and Marie had made. Considering that it was one of those rare occasions when he switched on the instrument panel for anything besides a quick system check-up, it was pure luck that Lars' satphone call was intercepted. Yet as soon as Manny heard a familiar voice coming through the transceiver—"Mayday, mayday, is anyone there?"—he reached over to pick up the hand mike.

Marie was helping raise a cabin's roof beam when one of the kids raced into town from the beach, breathlessly telling her that Mr. Castro needed to see her right away. She might have waited until the beam was safely

hoisted into place if the child hadn't added that Manny had just heard from Lars, and that it was an emergency. Someone quickly stepped in to take her place at the pulley-rope, and she jogged across Riverport to the beach, following the boy whom Manny had sent to find her.

Lars was still on the line when she climbed down the skimmer's top hatch. Manny was sitting in the pilot's seat; as she entered the cockpit, she observed that he'd patched himself directly into the com panel via a cable that he'd extended from his chest. "Here she is," Manny said, then he picked up the mike and extended it to her. "Lars. Says he's in trouble."

Marie hesitated, then took the mike from him. "Hello, Lars," she said, realizing even as she spoke how aloof she sounded. "How are you?"

"Marie . . . oh, man, it's good to hear you." Although the satellite downlink should have been perfect, the signal was scratchy, fuzzed with static. "I've got trouble. You gotta help me out."

Her lip curled. *What's the matter?* she was tempted to say. *Run out of bearshine and getting the shakes?* Yet when she glanced at Manny, he slowly nodded, confirming the gravity of the situation. "I'm listening . . . go on. Where are you?"

"On the big river," he said, meaning the Great Equatorial River. "About eighty miles southwest of you. An island a few miles west of the channel, just off the coast." His words came as a rush, and she was surprised to hear an undertone of panic in his voice. "I'm not kidding. You gotta get down here . . . we need you, real bad."

"You've got a boat." Despite herself, she was still skeptical.

"Sank. Shoals punched a hole in the hull while we were trying to make it to shore. We're lucky to get here before . . ."

A sudden rush of sound, as if something was moving past the satphone. In the background, a voice, unintelligible but nonetheless frightened. She caught only a few words—" . . . back, get back, they might . . ."—then Lars came back again.

"We've lost almost everyone." Now his voice was low, as if he was whispering into the satphone's mouthpiece. "Just me, James, and Coop . . . and Coop's in bad shape. We've got only one gun, and that's not going to help much. Marie, swear to God, you gotta get us out of this."

"Out of what?" Puzzled, she leaned closer to the com panel. "You're not making any sense. What's . . ."

Once again, in the background she hear a flurry of noise, as if the satphone was held in the hand of someone who was running. A couple of swift, violent *pop-pop-pop* sounds that she immediately recognized as the semi-auto gunfire. Then Lars' voice returned "Please, Marie . . . for the *luvva* God, come get us! I'm sorry about everything! Just come and . . ."

A sudden snap, like a dry twig breaking. Then silence.

"I have a fix on the location." Manny disconnected the cable from the com panel and let it spool back into a panel within his chest. "Latitude three-point-one degrees north, twenty-three minutes, longitude seventy-seven-point-nine degrees west, nine minutes." He pointed to the comp screen above the yoke. "Here."

Marie peered at the screen. Displayed upon it was an orbital map of Coyote. As Manny indicated, the signal from Lars' satphone originated

from the eastern tip of a large island off the southern coast of Great Dakota, just miles west of where the West Channel emptied into the Great Equatorial River.

She sighed. Less than a hundred miles away. Apparently Lars and his buddies hadn't wandered so far as she and the others had hoped. Maybe they thought they'd just go away for a while, get in some drinking time and do a little fishing, then come home and sweet-talk their way back into good graces with everyone they'd left behind. She could almost imagine him now. *Oh, babe, I was just foolin' with you. You know how much I love you. C'mon, now, sweetie, just let me in. . . .*

But that was in the past. She'd heard not only the gunshots, but also the terror in his voice. Somewhere just north of the equator, Lars had run into something that he couldn't handle. Marie tossed the mike on the dashboard, let out her breath.

"Better warm up the engines," she murmured. "I think we're going on a rescue mission."

They didn't go alone. When Marie went back into town to gather the things they'd need, she took a minute to find Chris and tell her what was going on. As it turned out, Missus Smith already knew something was up; the boy who'd fetched Marie had gone on to tell her as well, so when Marie located her in her cabin, she was putting her pack together.

"If there's trouble, you're going to need someone to ride shotgun." Chris didn't smile as she took down her rifle from the hooks above the door. Marie started to object, but she held up a hand. "James is a worthless drunk, and Cooper's a lowlife, but they're still my people. And you and Manny can't do this by yourselves."

Marie didn't argue. If the situation was as dire as Lars had led her to believe, she knew they'd need all the help they could get. So the two of them grabbed a medkit and some food from the mess tent, then they hurried back to the beach. News traveled fast in Riverport; a small crowd had already gathered near the skimmer, wanting to know what was going on. Chris told them what little she and Marie knew, then gave the town's remaining satphone to another woman and told her to monitor the emergency frequency. If anything were to happen to them, Missus Smith said, she was to call to Liberty and request—no, demand—assistance from the Colonial Militia.

She and Marie climbed aboard the skimmer. Manny revved the engines, then put the fans in reverse and slowly backed out into the water. As the skimmer pulled away from shore, Missus Smith went below to join Manny in the cockpit; Marie lingered on the aft deck, though, and watched while Riverport receded from view. Once again, she was leaving home . . . and she found herself surprised to realize how much she'd come to regard this small, underpopulated settlement as home. Only last month, she'd thought it was a mistake to stop here. Now she was afraid she'd never see it again.

It took the rest of the day for them to travel down the coast. They'd left shortly before noon, and although the current was with them, the distance from Riverport to the delta where the West Channel emptied into

the Great Equatorial River was considerable. Manny stayed close to shore as they cruised past the lowland marshes south of Riverport, vast tracts of sourgrass and spider-bush, the southeast range of the Black Mountains rising beyond them. The humid air lay still, sullen in the warmth of the afternoon sun; skeeters purred around the aft deck, and from the shore they could hear the cries of nesting birds.

This was a part of the world none of them had ever seen before. It wasn't long, though, before the view became monotonous. Shortly after lunch, while Missus Smith took a siesta, Marie relieved Manny at the controls. Lars had been reluctant to let her drive the skimmer, so it was a pleasure to take the yoke, feel the smooth vibration of the fans beneath her hands. Despite the urgency of the mission, she throttled down a quarter-bar, just to savor the sensation of water passing swiftly beneath the bottom of the hull.

"Not in a rush, are you?" Manny said after a few minutes. "You can go faster, you know."

Marie glanced at him. "Just enjoying the ride, that's all."

"No apologies necessary." Manny turned his head to glance back at Missus Smith. She lay upon an unrolled sleeping bag in the aft compartment, eyes closed and hands folded together on her chest. "Day's getting short, and it looks rather tight for two people back there. Unless you want to sleep up top. . . ."

Marie didn't reply, but instead throttled up the engines once more, returning the skimmer to cruise speed. Through the canopy, she could make out a low ridge gradually falling toward the southeastern tip of Great Dakota. Just past that point lay the Great Equatorial River; somewhere beyond that, the island where Lars and his companions were shipwrecked.

"I don't get it," she murmured, keeping her voice low so Chris could sleep. "Lars has been gone . . . what, five, six weeks? And he gets stranded so close to us?" She shook her head. "What's he been doing all this time?"

"No idea." Manny hesitated. "What I'm more concerned about is what you're going to tell him when you see him again."

Marie didn't say anything. She hadn't given the subject much thought, believing that Lars was out of her life for good, or at least until after the baby was born. Indeed, no one in Riverport knew that she was pregnant, save for Manny. She hoped that, by the time her condition became obvious, the town would be self-sufficient enough that she could take maternity leave and return to Liberty long enough for Wendy to deliver the baby in the colonial hospital. Then she'd be able to go back to Great Dakota with her newborn child and a clear conscience that she'd done the right thing.

"As little as possible," she said after a moment. Then she gave him a sidelong frown. "And neither will you."

"My lips are sealed." A pause. "Literally."

Marie grinned at the self-effacing joke. "You'd make a great father, you know that?" A new thought occurred to her. "Think you'd like the job?"

Now it was Manny's turn to become silent. He didn't respond for a minute or two; when Marie looked at him again, he was staring straight ahead, as if studying the channel. Once again, she found herself wishing

that his face was capable of displaying emotion, so that she'd have an idea of what thoughts were passing through his mind.

"Stay close to shore," he said at last. "Get out into deep water, and you might have trouble with the current."

A couple of hours later, they left the West Channel and entered the Great Equatorial River.

It was almost twilight, the sun's reddish-orange light illuminating the enormous granite escarpment that marked the southeastern tip of Great Dakota. Like the prow of some mammoth, petrified vessel, the sharp-edged cliffs towered nearly three hundred feet above the jagged shoals below. Manny had taken the yoke back by then; carefully steering clear of the surf that crashed against the shoals, he slowed down so that they could take in the majesty of the giant rock. Missus Smith had awoken from her nap, and she and Marie stood on the aft deck, watching as the skimmer slowly cruised beneath its shadow.

Just past the delta was the Great Equatorial River, so broad that its far side lay beyond the horizon. To the east, on the opposite shore, they could make out the thin, dark line that marked the west coast of New Florida. It wasn't until Manny turned the skimmer to the west and they began traveling up the south coast of Great Dakota that they spotted the smoke. Back-lit by the setting sun, it curled upward as a slender tendril from a dark form that seemed to float upon the water.

The island . . . and someone there had lit a signal fire.

Wary of the fading light, Manny pushed the engines up to full throttle and switched on the spotlights. Salt spray drenched the aft deck, chasing the two women below; from the cockpit, they watched the island gradually grow larger. Now they could see that it was a narrow stretch of land, about five miles long but less than a mile across, and heavily forested. The smoke rose from the closer end of the island, but they still couldn't see the fire. The island was a couple of miles away when the satphone crackled, and once again they heard Lars' voice.

"Hey, Marie! Is that you, babe?"

Marie picked up the handset. "Roger that. We see your smoke, and we're coming in."

Through the speaker, the ragged cheers of men shouting with relief. *"Oh, babe, I love you! Can't believe you got here so soon! Really made that sucker fly, didn'tcha?"*

Marie glanced at Manny. "Don't let him know," he said quietly. "It'll just upset him."

Missus Smith snickered. Marie shook her head, then keyed the mike again. "Yeah, sure . . . look, the sun's going down, so you're going to have to help us find you. If you've got a light, turn it on and shine it out toward the water so that we can see where you are."

A long pause, then Lars' voice returned, more calm this time. *"Can't do that. River horses might see the light, follow it back to us. We're taking a chance as is, just keeping a fire going."*

"River horses?" Marie stared at the satphone in puzzlement. "What are you . . . ?"

"Just take my word for it, okay? Kill your lights . . . we can see you now . . . and put someone on deck to look for the fire. That's where we are."

Marie shook her head, glanced at Manny. "What the hell is he . . . ?"

"Never mind. I'll go." Rising from her seat, Chris picked up her carbine. "Just get us in close, and I'll yell as soon as I spot the beach."

"Chris, wait . . ."

"Don't worry about it. I got my best friend to protect me." Missus Smith patted the stock of her rifle, then ducked her head and left the cockpit.

Early evening had settled upon the river, with the first stars beginning to appear in the darkening sky, when they caught sight of a flickering glow upon the island's eastern tip, close to the waterline. Chris called down from the aft deck and Manny throttled back the engines, then swung around so that the skimmer approached the point from an oblique angle. Through the bubble, they could see the leading edge of Bear's rings appearing above the eastern horizon, casting a silver luminescence upon the black water.

A couple of sudden bumps against the bottom of the hull as the skimmer hit unseen driftwood. "Wish we could switch on the spotlights," Marie murmured. "Can't see where we're going."

Manny turned off the interior lights. The cockpit was plunged into darkness save for the sallow glow of the instrument panel. "There," he said. "I can see now."

As if to demonstrate, he twisted the yoke hard to port. A moment later, there was a gentle bump against the starboard pontoon as the skimmer grazed a floating log. Once again, Marie remembered that Manny possessed infrared vision; now that Bear was rising, he was able to use its light as human eyes could not. An uncomfortable reminder that Manny was a savant. His soul might be human, but his body was not.

"You're almost there!" Once more, Lars' voice crackled through the transceiver. "*C'mon in! We'll meet you at the water!*"

The fire was very close now, less than a few dozen yards away. Marie started to reach for the mike when Chris yelled down through the top hatch. "There's something in the water! I saw it move!"

"Hold on!" Marie rose from her seat and started to head for the hatch. "I'm coming up!"

"Stay put." Manny remained calm. "We're almost there. Thirty feet more, and they'll be able to . . ."

A gunshot from the aft deck, followed by two more. Marie bolted from the cockpit and scrambled up the ladder.

In the wan light cast from the open hatch, she saw Missus Smith standing at the starboard rail, rifle raised to her shoulder and pointed toward the water just beyond the skimmer. Left eye fixed upon the infrared sight, she tracked something Marie couldn't see, then cursed and raised the barrel.

"Dammit! It's gone under!" She glanced at Marie. "You see that?" Without waiting for an answer, she lunged for the far end of the deck, pointed the gun down over the side. "Whatever it is, it's goddamn big!"

"What did you see?" Marie peered into the darkness. With night closing in, there was little that her eyes could make out. "What did it look like?"

"I dunno." Missus Smith searched the water, her rifle's muzzle sweeping back and forth. "All I saw was this giant head. Sort of like a horse, but . . ."

"Hey! Over here!"

Lars's voice, from the port side. Looking around, Marie caught a brief glimpse of two figures caught in silhouette against the signal fire. Then they disappeared; a few seconds later, the sound of men splashing through shallow water, as if meaning to swim out toward the approaching skimmer.

"Stay back!" Marie rushed to the port rail as Manny coaxed the skimmer closer to shore. "There's something out . . .!"

Another gunshot from behind her, and Marie turned just in time to see a massive head rise above the starboard side.

Almost equine in shape, yet larger than any horse's head she'd ever seen, it swayed back and forth upon a thick, amphibian neck. Narrow eyes deep within a bony skull reflected the dim glow of the firelight; she had an impression of jagged teeth inside a cavernous mouth, and shrank back in horror.

The river horse loomed above Missus Smith, and for a moment it seemed as if it was studying her. She squeezed off another shot, but her aim was wild. The creature recoiled, but only for an instant. Then its head pounced forward, and its jaws clamped down upon Chris's shoulder.

Crying out in agony, she dropped her weapon. The rifle clattered to the deck, and Marie hurled herself toward it. Chris was battering her fists against the creature's skull as she snatched up the rifle.

"Shoot it!" Chris screamed. "Shoot . . .!"

Yet before Marie could get a clear shot, the creature yanked Chris from the deck. The toe of her left boot caught against the railing, and for a half-second Marie thought that might save her. Then the boot was ripped from her foot and her body was dragged overboard, down into the black water.

Marie ran to the railing, fired aimlessly into the water, but there was nothing to be done now; the river horse had disappeared, taking her friend with it.

She sagged against the railing, still staring at the place where Chris Smith had vanished. She was barely aware that Lars had scrambled up the ladder, with James just behind him, or that Manny had shoved the throttles all the way forward. The fans roared as the skimmer hurtled away from the island. Cold water, tasting of salt and death, cascaded upon her.

She stared back at the island that she'd barely visited, knowing even then that she'd never be the same again.

From the diary of Marie Montero: Adnachiel 9, c.y. 06

We rescued Lars and James from Smith Island—that's what Manny has decided to call it, in honor of Chris—but they were the only two survivors. The other five men in their group were killed by river horses: the first four in the initial attack, with Cooper surviving long enough to reach

the island only to die before we could reach them. Considering everything that happened, they're lucky to be alive.

Lars wasn't pleased to see Manny again. Almost as soon as he came aboard, in fact, he told Manny to hand over the skimmer's controls. But Manny refused and I backed him up, and after that Lars hunkered down in the back with James. He didn't put up much of a fight, really. He and James were cold, wet and hungry, and I think he was more scared than he wanted to admit.

Took most of the night to get back home. Didn't reach Riverport until a few hours before sunrise. Found some food in the back (they'd lost everything when the boat capsized . . . lucky that Lars had the satphone in his pocket) and once they ate, Lars told us what happened. Don't know how much is true and how much isn't, but here goes:

After they got thrown out, the seven of them sailed a few miles downstream, then made camp in the swamps. At first they thought they'd just wait until "the heat blew over" (as Lars puts it), then come back and try to talk their way back into our good graces. After a while, though, they decided that they were better off without us anyway—little did they know the feeling was mutual.

They knew they couldn't rough it on their own for very long, so they talked over what they should do next. Lars told them about his good friends in Bridgeton who he was sure would take him in—I remember when he tried to use that line on me—and he managed to persuade the others that everything would be wine and roses if they could only get there.

So they sailed down the West Channel to the Big River, then turned east and moved along the southern coast of New Florida, and finally turned north and went up the East Channel till they reached Bridgeton. Took them nearly three weeks to make the trip, so they must not have been in much of a hurry. James said something about "doing a lot of fishing," so I figure they were drinking all the way. Miracle they made it in the first place.

But they didn't stay long in Bridgeton before they had to move on again. Lars is a little vague about that part of the story. He says he found Tiny, Lester, and Biggs, but none of them had room for the group in their houses and they couldn't find jobs anywhere. I find that story hard to believe. More likely someone in town recognized Lars and knew that he'd been exiled from the colonies, and that taking him in would result in criminal prosecution. The way he carries on about how his pals "betrayed" him makes me wonder if his old buddies decided to play it safe and turn him in. Or maybe Lars and the others just wore out their welcome, drinking and causing trouble, until everyone in town finally got fed up with them and the blueshirts showed them the way to the docks.

In any case, they left Bridgeton in a hurry. Now they had a choice—either keep going north and try for New Boston (fat chance! they would've gotten the same reception there, more than likely!) or go back the way they'd come and try to beg forgiveness from Missus Smith.

That's when Lars turned on his charm. For the next few minutes, I got an earful about how much he loved me, how he couldn't live without me, etc. while James is sitting beside him with this shit-eating grin on his face,

staring down the front of my shirt. I heard him out, then told him to go on with the story.

So, anyway, they sailed back down the East Channel until they reached the big river, then turned west and started toward Great Dakota. But they'd just reached the delta and were about to turn north up the West Channel when they changed their minds and instead decided to go downriver a little further.

Again, I'm not sure what to believe. Lars says that some of the others wanted to get in a little more fishing, while James says they wanted to give us a little more time to think about how much they missed us. I think the truth is somewhere in-between—i.e., they got cold feet about having to beg their way back into camp. Besides, the weather was still warm and they still had plenty of booze (no doubt they picked up more bearshine in Bridgeton). In any case, they opted to sail downriver a little ways—to have one more party before they came home to face the music, I think—to an island they'd spotted before.

That's when the river horses found them.

There's a lot about Coyote we still don't know, even after being here nearly nineteen Earth-years. Not all of it is the same; we're still finding new animals, plants, etc. And considering how long the Great Equatorial River is, we've barely explored 1/10 of it. So maybe we shouldn't be surprised that there's more to it than catwhales, weirdlings, and redfish. There are creatures that have never met humans before, and don't care if we've got boats and guns.

In any case, the boat was coming close to the island when the creatures attacked. Lars says that Cooper gave them the name "river horses" because they look like sea horses back on Earth, only bigger (yeah—a lot bigger). Manny believes the similarity may only come from what they saw above water; he thinks they may be something like crocodiles back on Earth, only warm-blooded and much larger. That's something I don't know, though, so I have to take his word for it.

In any case, a pack of them attacked the boat just as the men approached the island. Two or maybe three of them came in all at once, from both sides, just after one of the guys jumped overboard to swim ashore with a rope to tie off. He died first, before the rest of the group knew what hit him, and while the others were still running back and forth on deck, the other two river horse went for the boat.

It's hard to tell to what happened after that, except that everyone panicked. The flechette guns they had were useless, in any case. Three more men were killed and the boat capsized before Lars, James, and Cooper managed to swim ashore. And even then Coop barely got away—a river horse caught him in its mouth, but he kicked it in some way that made it let him go (I wish Chris had learned that trick), then Lars grabbed him and hauled him ashore. By then their friends were gone and their boat was sunk.

Like I said, they were lucky on two scores: Lars was carrying the sat-phone in his shirt pocket and James had a waterproof lighter in his pants. So after they carried Cooper the rest of the way onto dry land, they started a fire on the beach. But that seemed to attract the river horses, so they

doused it, and didn't start another one until after Lars used the satphone to call for help and they were sure we were on the way. They tried to keep Coop alive, but they didn't have a medkit and he'd lost too much blood. By the time we got to them, he'd been dead three hours.

Don't know what to make of all this. Lars is back. He's asleep in my bed in the cabin I built without his help. When he gets up, maybe I'll talk to him. Or maybe I won't. But he's not welcome, that's for damn sure.

River horses. What a name. Kind of think it describes me. Something that just keeps pulling and pulling, with no end in sight.

Marie kept her distance from Lars. As soon as she could, she evicted him from her cabin, telling him that, despite what happened on Smith Island, she wasn't taking him back. No one else in town wanted him either, so he and James moved into a tool shed, the only shelter available to them in Riverport.

The two men found jobs with the timber crew, and for a little while it seemed as if Marie would be able to keep Lars out of her life. They saw each other infrequently, usually at dinner time when they stood in the chow line together, and her friends made sure that she never had to sit next to him. It hardly mattered, though, because Lars seldom spoke to her; indeed, his only companion was James, and together they occupied the lowest rung of the social ladder. Although they'd returned to the settlement, they were far from being accepted back into the community. Everyone knew what had occurred on Smith Island, and they held Lars and James responsible for Missus Smith's death.

Yet it wasn't long before the situation changed.

With Chris gone, there was a vacuum that had to be filled. Although Marie didn't want the job, she soon found the others turning to her for leadership. She and Missus Smith had been close, and people were looking for someone who could fill her role. So it came to pass that, when the next town meeting rolled around and a special election was held, Marie discovered she was the sole nominee for mayor. Although she accepted the job with reluctance, she promised to continue the work her predecessor had begun, the transformation of Riverport into a self-sufficient community.

By then, that which only Manny had known had become obvious: she was pregnant, with her child due by the end of the year. Now that she was mayor, Marie knew leaving Riverport even for a short while was out of the question. Yet she also realized that her condition gave the settlement a bargaining chip it hadn't possessed before. So one evening, with Manny's assistance, she composed a formal letter to the Colonial Council, which was transmitted via satphone to Liberty the following morning.

The response came quickly, and not the way she'd expected. Marie was working on the farm when she heard a familiar sound. Turning to raise a hand against the afternoon sun, she watched as a gyro soared across the West Channel, making a lazy arch above the settlement as the pilot searched for a place to land. Marie put down her rake, picked up her straw hat from where she'd placed it on a tree stump, and walked back into town to greet the visitors.

She wasn't surprised to find that the delegation from Liberty included Carlos. For a few seconds after he climbed out of the gyro, brother and sister regarded one another with mutual discomfort, neither of them quite knowing what to say or do. Then Carlos grinned and stretched out his hands, and Marie walked over to give him a hug, to the warm applause of the settlers who'd come out to the beach.

This wasn't the only reunion. Also aboard the gyro was Clark Thompson. He waited patiently beside the aircraft until his nephew shuffled forward from the back of the crowd. Lars was a broken man; thin and hollow-eyed, his shoulders slumped, he'd lost the arrogance that he had carried when he'd left New Florida. The two men regarded each other for a moment, then Clark solemnly extended his hand, and Lars took it with shame-faced reticence.

The townspeople quit work early that afternoon, and a special dinner was prepared for their honored guests. While the cooks labored in the mess tent, Marie escorted Carlos and Clark, along with the two other members of the Council, on a quick tour of Riverport. Although she was embarrassed by what little she had to show them—a half-dozen log cabins, along with a couple of sheds and a half-built greenhouse—the council representatives were impressed by the progress made in only a month by less than thirty people. It was clear, though, that the settlement would need assistance if it was going to survive the long winter ahead, and Marie knew without asking that this support would not come without a price.

Her suspicions were confirmed shortly after dinner, when Carlos came over to her. "Let's take a walk, shall we?" he said quietly. "There are some things we need to discuss, just the two of us."

The crimson rays of the setting sun peered from behind purple clouds as they strolled together along the beach, Marie's hand clasped within the crook of Carlos's arm. "You've done well," he said as they walked along the water's edge, watching the tide lap at the mottled sands. "Better than I thought . . . than we thought . . . you would."

"Thank you." To the east, Bear's ring-plane was beginning to glide into view above the horizon. "I can't take credit for this, though. These people have worked awful hard to . . ."

"I don't mean the colony. I mean you." He pulled her a little closer. "Hard to believe you're the same girl . . . the same woman, I mean . . . who was getting in bar fights just a month ago. You've changed a lot since then. I'm proud of you."

"Well . . ."

"Hear me out, please. This is important." He paused, as if to choose his words. "I've spoken with the magistrates. They're willing to let you return . . . on probation, at least, so long as you behave yourself . . . but my guess is that you won't come back."

"Nope." Marie grinned and shook her head. "Wouldn't look good for a mayor to skip town just because she's pregnant." Her smile faded. "Besides, people might think I'm nothing but trouble. Can't have that, can we?" Embarrassed, Carlos looked away. He started to release her arm, but she pulled him close again. "Forget it. You did what you had to do. If you didn't, I'd be digging ditches now."

"Yeah, well . . . like I said, you did better than most people expected." He glanced back at the settlement. "As for Lars . . . that's a whole 'nother issue."

"Not an issue at all." Marie gazed out at the channel. "He's got his life now, and I've got mine. So far as I'm concerned, he can go back any time he wants. We'll get along just fine without him."

"Well . . . no." Carlos shook his head. "The amnesty the maggies have offered you doesn't extend to him. They know everything he did . . . or at least what you've told us, along with how he tried to hide out in Bridgeton . . . and they don't consider him to be—" he searched for the correct phrase —"sufficiently rehabilitated," if I remember it correctly. So he's stuck here, whether he likes it or not."

"All right." Marie gave an offhand shrug. "Fine. Whatever makes them happy, I can live with it."

"It's a little more complicated than that." Carlos let go of her arm, tucked his hands in his pockets. "Problem is, you're carrying his child. And Uncle Clark is an old-fashioned sort of guy who seems to think that, no matter what else, his nephew has a right to be a father."

"Like hell, he does." Feeling a surge of anger, Marie stopped and turned toward him. "Lars knocked me up one night when I was too tired to resist. He . . ."

"Did he rape you?" Carlos looked her straight in the eye. "Tell the truth." She hesitated. "Well, no, but . . ."

"Then there's nothing I can do . . . and please, don't ask me to lie on your behalf." He held up a hand before she could object. "Clark Thompson hasn't given up on his boy, any more than I gave up on you. He wants the best for him, and that includes the prospect of him settling down and raising a family."

"Oh, for the love of . . ."

"Just listen, please." Carlos let out his breath. "There's more to this than just you two. Clark has a strong voice on the Council, and it's become even stronger since word came that you and Lars discovered a new source of timber. . . ."

"It wasn't him and me, dammit." She felt her face becoming warm. "It was Chris Smith's idea. She . . ."

"Maybe, but she's not around anymore, is she? And the way Clark has put this to the council, this is your settlement. Yours and Lars's." Again, he raised a hand before she could protest. "He's willing to allocate everything you need . . . tools, generators, boats, whatever . . . to turn this place into a viable colony as soon as possible. A blank check. . . ."

"But his signature has to be on it." Marie stared at him. "Right?"

"Right." Carlos bent down to pick up a piece of driftwood. "But that's just council business. I've also learned that he's already taken steps toward setting up a private company to corner the market on the Great Dakota timber industry. The Thompson Wood Company, with him and Molly in control . . ."

"Oh, great. That's excellent." Marie shook her head in disgust. "Coyote's first major corporation. What's next, a stockholder meeting?"

"Probably." Carlos hurled the stick out into the water. "What do you

want? Social collectivism all over again? Maybe Manny Castro would like that, but . . .”

“Leave Manny out of this.” She absently ran her fingers through her hair. “Look, let me get this straight. Clark is willing to provide support for Riverport . . .”

“Which is what you want.”

“ . . . but he’s not going to persuade the Council to give us the stuff we need to do that unless his family has a lock on the timber industry.”

“That’s correct, yes.”

“And for him to do that, he wants . . .” Marie’s voice trailed off as she put everything together. “Oh, god . . . Carlos, you can’t be saying . . .”

“You know what I’m saying.” Carlos looked down at the ground, suddenly reluctant to meet her eyes. “Uncle Clark wants what’s best for his favorite nephew. A wife, a child, a job . . .”

“I don’t love him!” In frustration, she turned away from him. “He’s not the one I want! I . . . !”

She stopped before she said something she knew she’d regret. Her legs buckled beneath her, and she fell on bended knees to the beach. “Is there someone else?” Carlos asked, kneeling down beside her. “Who is it? Tell me, please. . . .”

Marie raised her head, looked away. For just a moment, beyond the nearest dune, she caught a glimpse of a figure cloaked in shadows, a single red eye reflecting the light of the setting sun. Then the figure disappeared, a twilight ghost swallowed by the coming night.

“No,” she whispered. “There’s no one else.”

From the diary of Marie Montero: Barbiel 15, c.y. 06

The first keelboat from Liberty arrived today: fifteen people in all, including Clark and Molly Thompson and Lars’s brother Garth. And that’s just one boat: two more are on the way, sailing out from Bridgeton and making their way around New Florida until they reach Great Dakota. We’ve made sure that they know to avoid Smith Island. That place belongs to the river horses, and we should all stay away from there.

By the time everyone gets here, Riverport’s population will have doubled—no, tripled—in size. Only a couple of months ago, this explosion would’ve been unimaginable. Maybe even impossible: there was no way we could have supported seventy-two people. But apparently there’s quite a few folks in New Florida and Midland who want to take a shot at starting a new colony, especially if there’s a chance they’ll make a good living working for the Thompson Wood Company.

Now that the Council has formally recognized us, we’re getting everything we need: food, livestock, clothing, hardware, building materials, comps, even a couple of electrical generators. I was told that several panes of uncut plate glass are also being shipped out to us, which means we’ll be able to finish work on the greenhouse. Such a small thing, really, and yet so necessary. Once the greenhouse is up, we’ll be able to feed ourselves through winter.

Lars is happier now that he has his family with him. Our relationship has been pretty much touch and go since he moved in with me. Even though I've told him that he's going back to the tool shed if he starts drinking again, there's been a couple of nights when he's come home with ale on his breath. Decided to look past that as much as I can. He's been nicer to me lately, and he seems to be honestly looking forward to raising a child. We've already decided on names: Hawk if it's a boy, Rain if it's a girl.

Clark insists that we get married, and I think that's pretty much inevitable. I'm still not sure whether I can love Lars, but the baby is coming soon, and he or she is going to need a daddy. Besides, the Thompson Wood Company is going to be a family-owned business. If I want an interest in it, getting hitched to Lars is part of the deal. Carlos and Wendy still don't trust him very much, but they're willing to go along with the plan. It may not be the happiest of marriages, but . . . well, we'll see.

Clark and I have talked things over lately, and we've agreed that he's probably better cut out to be mayor than I am. After all, he's had experience with this sort of thing before, and with a baby on the way, the last thing I need to worry about is running a town. We haven't gone public with this yet, but once all the newcomers arrive and get settled in, I'm going to resign and put my support behind him in the special election. Maybe not the most democratic way of doing things, but at least it'll help make sure that Riverport has a strong leader during its first year.

So all is well, or at least as well as it can be. Except for one thing . . .

Manuel Castro had his own cabin, a one-room shack on the far side of town. A handful of New Boston settlers helped him build it, but since then he'd lived alone, becoming increasingly reclusive as new people began to arrive in Riverport. The cabin had no windows, and no furniture save a table, a chair, and a cabinet for his few belongings. The one room was lit by a fish-oil lamp suspended from its rafters, and it wasn't until someone noticed that they didn't see its glow seeping beneath the door-frame one evening that anyone realized the savant had disappeared.

Learning this news the following morning, Marie hurried to his cabin, only to discover it had been stripped bare. Manny hadn't left a note, yet when she questioned several townspeople, she discovered that he'd recently bartered his meager possessions—his chair here, his desk there—in exchange for hand tools and a backpack. The sort of things one might need in order to homestead in the wilderness. That was when she knew where he'd gone.

She didn't tell Lars or anyone else where she was going when she left town by herself. By then it was late autumn; the wind had long since ripped the leaves from the trees, and the first hard freeze had solidified the ground. She bundled herself warmly in the oversized wool serape a couple of friends had woven for her, and filled a waterskin from the town well. Along the way, she found a broken tree limb to use as a staff to help support her weight. In her second trimester, it felt as if she were carrying a heavy sack in her midriff; she made sure that she rested frequently, and drank water whenever she was thirsty.

The path leading into the foothills was just as she'd remembered it,

when she and Manny had hiked up Thunder Ridge in the first days of autumn. The season had become colder since then, the sky the color of iron, yet by midday she'd reached the bluff where she and Manny had rested on an afternoon more warm and fair than this. It was here that she found him.

It was almost as if he'd never left this place at all. He sat on a boulder, pad propped upon his knee, using a claw-like finger to etch a picture on its screen. His cowl was pulled up around his face, though, so his blind eye didn't see her coming until her staff made a scraping noise on the bare rock. Then he looked up, and stared at her for a long time.

"Marie," he said at last. "You shouldn't have come."

"You shouldn't have left." She clung to the branch with both hands, trying to catch her breath. "Damn it, Manny. Why did you . . . ?"

"Hush." Putting down his pad, he rose to his feet and walked over to her. "You're pregnant, remember? This can't be good for . . ."

"I'm fine. Exercise is good for the baby." Yet she let him take her by the shoulders, ease her to a seat on the ground. "Where do you think you're going? Why didn't you . . . ?"

"So many questions." The soft rasp from his chest that signified a chuckle. "You know, you've changed quite a bit since we first met. Back then . . ."

"Shut up and talk to me."

"Which do you want first? Shut up, or . . . ?"

"Never mind." She glared at him. "Why . . . ?"

"Because I don't belong down there." His single eye peered at her. "I went with you and Lars because I didn't want to be the resident freak in Liberty. Now Lars is back, and I don't want to be the resident freak in Riverport either."

"Lars is . . ."

"I know what Lars is, just as I know that I can't compete with him." He shook his head. "I need to find my own place in the world, even if it means living alone. So I left. Simple solution to a simple problem." All this came in the same monotone he'd assumed when he'd first met her. "Any more questions? Catch your breath, and..."

"One more, then I'll go home." She stared at him. "Do you love me?"

"Of course, I love you." His reply was immediate, without reservation. "You should know that by now, just as you know it'll never work out . . ."

"Dammit, Manny . . . !"

"Please . . . just listen." Standing up, he pointed toward the nearby hills. "I'm building a cabin up there. Just for myself, with no one else around. But if you ever need me, that's where I'll be."

She tried hard not to cry, but the tears came anyway. Manny didn't say anything for a moment, then he reached down and, taking her by the shoulders, gently raised her to her feet. "You'll do fine. You've got a family again, and you're no longer an outcast. Everything you've ever wanted is yours for the taking. All you need to do is be strong . . . and you've shown that you have more courage than you thought you had."

She started to reply, but found she could think of nothing to say, so instead she put her arms around Manny and laid her head against his

chest. She heard no heartbeat within his metallic body, but when he wrapped his arms around her shoulders, the embrace was tender and undeniably human.

They stood that way for a long time until he finally pushed her away. Looking up at him, she was surprised to see a few white flakes upon his cowl; unnoticed by either of them, snow had begun to fall.

"Storm's coming in," she murmured. "I better get back."

"Yes, you should." Manny reached down, picked up her walking stick. "Go quickly, before it gets too rough."

Marie nodded as she took the stick from him. There was nothing more to be said, so she turned and started toward the downhill trail. At the edge of the tree line, though, she paused to look back. The snow was falling more swiftly now, making a soft hiss as the wind carried it through the trees.

For a moment, she caught a last glimpse of a black-robed figure walking across the bluff, heading for the dense woodlands. And then he was gone, leaving her to follow a path that was hers and hers alone. ○

WHERE THE FIRST BACKYARD STARSHIP LIFTED OFF

Velocity Street ran next to the immense parking lot of an IGA store and beyond that along a stretch where half the meter poles were decapitated stood rows of abandoned welfare tenements a Pentecostal church and a blackened brick hotel that kept a commons room with faded velvet wallpaper and Space Cowboy still on the juke we're talking inner suburbia gone to weeds streetlights with no more wattage than a bug lamp yet this was a place that Midwestern kids escaped to far from potluck socials and the putting by of preserves far removed from the slow burn of their futures under the transmission cowling of a combine tractor they found work at the NASA labs shared apartments married saved for veneered furniture took a loan for a second station wagon with a trailer hitch popped out a few kids read up on warp engine science and talked and talked on weekends about leaving the Heartland for a place where the universe whispered its mysteries in a primary hue

—Robert Frazier



A SMALL ROOM IN KOBOLDTOWN

Michael Swanwick

The author has just finished writing his latest book, *The Dragons of Babel*—excerpts from which have been published in *Asimov's* as "The Word That Sings the Scythe" (October/November 2004), "An Episode of Stardust" (January 2006), "Lord Weary's Empire" (December 2006), and now "A Small Room in Koboldtown." Michael tells us, "One chapter from the end, my wife Marianne was convinced that it was all going to end miserably, as so many of my stories do. Imagine her surprise when she discovered that it all comes out happily. No, really. An honest-to-gosh happy ending. Honest. I mean it."

That winter, Will le Fey held down a job working for a haint politician named Salem Toussaint. Chiefly, his function was to run errands while looking conspicuously solid. He fetched tax forms for the alderman's constituents, delivered stacks of documents to trollish functionaries, fixed L&I violations, presented boxes of candied john-the-conqueror root to retiring secretaries, absent-mindedly dropped slim envelopes containing twenty-dollar bills on desks. When somebody important died, he brought a white goat to the back door of the Fane of Darkness to be sacrificed to the Nameless Ones. When somebody else's son was drafted or went to prison, he hammered a nail in the nkisi nkonde that Toussaint kept in the office to ensure his safe return. He canvassed voters in haint neighborhoods like Ginny Gall, Beluthahatchie, and Diddy-Wah-Diddy, where the bars were smoky, the music was good, and it was dangerous to smile at the whores. He negotiated the labyrinthine bureaucracies of City Hall. Not everything he did was strictly legal, but none of it was actually criminal. Salem Toussaint didn't trust him enough for that.

One evening, Will was stuffing envelopes with Ghostface while Jimi Be-good went over a list of ward-heelers with the alderman, checking those who could be trusted to turn out the troops in the upcoming election and crossing out those who had a history of pocketing the walking-around

money and standing idle on election day or, worse, steering the vote the wrong way because they were double-dipping from the opposition. The door between Toussaint's office and the anteroom was open a crack and Will could eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Grandfather Domovoy was turned to stone last August," Jimi Begood said, "so we're going to have to find somebody new to bring out the Slovaks. There's a vila named—"

Ghostface snapped a rubber band around a bundle of envelopes and lofted them into the mail cart on the far side of the room. "Three points!" he said. Then, "You want to know what burns my ass?"

"No," Will said.

"What burns my ass is how you and me are doing the exact same job, but you're headed straight for the top while I'm going to be stuck here licking envelopes forever. And you know why? Because you're solid."

"That's just racist bullshit," Will said. "Toussaint is never going to promote me any higher than I am now. Haints like seeing a fey truckle to the Big Guy, but they'd never accept me as one of his advisors. You know that as well as I do."

"Yeah, but you're not going to be here forever, are you? In a couple of years, you'll be holding down an office in the Mayoralty. Wouldn't surprise me one bit if you made it all the way to the Palace of Leaves."

"Either you're just busting my chops, or else you're a fool. Because if you meant it, you'd be a fool to be ragging on me about it. If Toussaint were in your position, he'd make sure I was his friend, and wherever I wound up he'd have an ally. You could learn from his example."

Ghostface lowered his voice to a near-whisper. "Toussaint is old school. I've got nothing to learn from a glad-handing, pompous, shucking-and-jiving—"

The office door slammed open. They both looked up.

Salem Toussaint stood in the doorway, eyes rolled up in his head so far that only the whites showed. He held up a hand and in a hollow voice said, "One of my constituents is in trouble."

The alderman was spooky in that way. He had trodden the streets of Babel for so many decades that its molecules had insinuated themselves into his body through a million feather-light touches on its bricks and railings, its bars and brothel doors, its accountants' offices and parking garages, and his own molecules had in turn been absorbed by the city, so that there was no longer any absolute distinction between the two. He could read Babel's moods and thoughts and sometimes—as now—it spoke to him directly.

Toussaint grabbed his homburg and threw his greatcoat over his arm. "Jimi, stay here and arrange for a lawyer. We can finish that list later. Ghostface, Will—you boys come with me."

The alderman plunged through the door. Ghostface followed.

Will hurried after them, opening the door and closing it behind him, then running to make up for lost time.

Ghostface doubled as Toussaint's chauffeur. In the limo, he said, "Where to, Boss?"

"Koboldtown. A haint's been arrested for murder and we got to get him off."

"You think he was framed?" Will asked.

"What the fuck difference does it make? He's a voter."

Koboldtown was a transitional neighborhood with all the attendant tensions. There were lots of haints on the streets, but the apartment building the police cars were clustered about had sprigs of fennel over the doorway to keep them out. Salem Toussaint's limousine pulled up just in time for them to see a defiant haint being hauled away in rowan-wood handcuffs. The beads at the ends of his duppy-braids clicked angrily as he swung his head around. "I ain't done nothin'!" he shouted. "This is all bull-shit, you fuckers! I'mna come back an' kill you all!" His eyes glowed hellishly and an eerie blue nimbus surrounded his head; clear indicators that he'd been shooting up crystal goon. Will was surprised the haint was even able to stand.

The limo came to a stop and Will hopped out to open Salem Toussaint's door. Toussaint climbed ponderously out and stopped the guards with an imperious gesture. Then he spoke briefly with their captive. "Go quietly, son. I'll see you get a good lawyer, the best money can buy." Will flipped open his cell, punched a number, and began speaking into it in an earnest murmur. It was all theater—he'd dialed the weather and Jimi Begood had doubtless already engaged a defender—but, combined with Toussaint's presence, it calmed the haint down. He listened carefully as the alderman concluded, "Just don't get yourself killed, that's the important thing. Understand?"

The haint nodded.

In the lobby, two officers were talking with the doorman. All three stiffened at the sight of haints walking in the door, relaxed when they saw Will restoring the twigs of fennel, and smiled with relief as they recognized Toussaint. It all happened in a flicker, but Will saw it. And if he noticed, how could his companions not? Nevertheless, the alderman glided in, shaking hands and passing out cigars that the police acknowledged gratefully and stowed away in the inside pockets of their coats. "What's the crime?" he asked.

"Murder," said one of the cops.

Toussaint whistled once, low and long, as if he hadn't already known. "Which floor?"

"Second."

They waited for the elevator, though the stairs were handy and it would have been faster to walk. Salem Toussaint would no more have climbed those stairs than he would have driven his own car. He made sure you understood what a big mahoff he was before he slapped you on the back and gave your nice horse a sugar cube. As the doors opened, Toussaint turned to Ghostface and remarked, "You're looking mighty grim. Something the matter?"

Ghostface shook his head stiffly. He stared, unblinking, straight ahead of himself all the way to their destination.

There were two detectives in the frigid apartment, both Tylwyth Teg, golden-skinned and leaf-eared, in trench coats that looked like they had been sent out to be professionally rumped. They turned, annoyed, when

the cop standing guard at the door let the three of them in, then looked resigned as they recognized the alderman.

"Shulpae! Xisuthros!" Toussaint slapped backs and shook hands as if he were working the room at a campaign fundraiser. "You're looking good, the both of you."

"Welcome to our humble crime scene, Salem," Detective Xisuthros said. He swept a hand to take in the room: One window, half open, with cold winter air still flowing in through it. Its sill and the wall beneath, black with blood. The burglar bars looked intact. A single dresser, a bed, a chair that had been smashed to flinders. A dribble of blood that led from the window to a tiny bathroom with the door thrown wide. "I should have known you'd show up."

A boggart sprawled lifeless on the bathroom floor. Its chest had been ripped open. There was a gaping hole where the heart should have been.

"Who's the stiff?" Toussaint asked.

"Name's Bobby Buggane. Just another lowlife."

"I see you hauled off an innocent haint."

"Now, Salem, don't be like that. It's an open and shut case. The door was locked and bolted from the inside. Burglar bars on the window and a sprig of fennel over it. The only one who could have gotten in was the spook. He works as a janitor here. We found him sleeping it off on a cot in the basement."

"Haint." Salem Toussaint's eyes were hard. "Please."

After the briefest of pauses, the detective said, "Haint."

"Give me the story."

"About an hour ago, there was a fight. Bodies slamming against the wall, furniture smashing. Everybody on the hall complained. By the time the concierge got here, it was all over. She called us. We broke in."

"Why didn't the concierge have a key?"

"She did. Buggane put in a deadbolt. You can imagine what the old bat had to say about that."

"Why wasn't there a haint-ward on the door?"

"Didn't need one. Doorman in the lobby. Only one haint in the building."

Will squinted at the wall above the door. "There's a kind of pale patch up there, like there used to be a ward and somebody took it down."

Detective Shulpae, the quiet one, turned to stare at him. "So?"

"So what kind of guy installs a deadbolt but takes down the ward? That doesn't make sense."

"The kind who likes to invite his haint buddy over for a shooting party every now and then." Detective Xisuthros pointed toward the dresser with his chin. A set of used works lay atop it. "The concierge says they were so thick that some of the neighbors thought they were fags." He turned back to Toussaint. "Alderman, if you want to question our work here, fine, go ahead. I'm just saying. There's not a lot of hope for the boy."

"Will's right!" Ghostface said. He went to the window. "And another thing. Look at all the blood on the sill. This is where it happened. So how the hell did he get all the way into the bathroom? Somebody ripped his heart out, so he decided to wash his hands?"

Now both detectives were staring at him, hard. "You don't know much

about boggarts," Xisuthros said. "They're tough. They can live for five minutes with their heads ripped off. A heart's nothing. And, yeah, that's exactly what he did—washed his hands. Old habits go last. One of the first things we did was turn off the water. Otherwise, I thought the concierge was going to have a seizure."

Ghostface looked around wildly. "What happened to the heart? Why isn't it here? I suppose you think the haint *ate* it, huh? I suppose you think we're all cannibals."

In a disgusted tone, Detective Xisuthros said, "Get Sherlock Holmes Junior the fuck out of here."

Salem Toussaint took Ghostface by the elbow, led him to the door. "Why don't you wait outside?"

Ghostface turned grey. But he stamped angrily out of the room and down the hall. Will followed. He didn't have to be told that this was part of his job.

Outside, Ghostface went straight to the alley below Buggane's window. There were no chalk marks or crime scene tape, so the police obviously hadn't found any evidence there. Nor was there a heart lying on the pavement. A dog or a night-gaunt could have run off with it, of course. But there was no blood either, except for a stain under the window and maybe a stray drop or two that couldn't be seen in the dark.

"So what happened to the heart?" Ghostface paced back and forth, unable to keep still. "It didn't just fly away."

"I don't know," Will said.

"You be Buggane." Ghostface slapped a hand against the brick wall. "Here's the window. You stand here looking out it. Now. I come up behind you. How do I rip your heart out in a way that leaves all that blood on the windowsill? From behind you, I can't get at your heart. If you turn around to face me, the blood doesn't splash on the sill. Now, those ignorant peckerwood detectives probably think I could shove my hands through Buggane's back and *push* his heart out. But it doesn't work like that. Two things can't occupy the same space at the same time. If I make my hands solid while I'm inside your chest, I'm going to fuck them up seriously. So I didn't come at you from behind."

"Okay."

"But if you turn around so I can come at you from the front, the blood's not going to spray over the sill, is it? So I've got to be between you and the window. I don't know if you noticed, but Ice didn't have any blood on him. None. Zip. Nada. Maybe you think I could rip somebody's heart out and then make myself insubstantial fast enough that the blood would spray through me. I don't think so. But even if I could, the blood's going to spatter all over the floor too. Which it didn't. So you tell me—how could I rip your heart out and leave the blood all over the sill like that?"

"You couldn't."

"Thank you. *Thank* you. That's right. I couldn't."

"So?" Will said.

"So there's something fishy going on, that's all. Something suspicious. Something wrong."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." Abruptly, Ghostface's hands fell to his sides. Just like that, all the life went out of him. He slumped despondently. "I just don't know."

"Ghostface," Will said, "why does all this matter? You called this guy Ice. What's he to you?"

The haint's face was as pale as ash, as stiff as bone. In a stricken voice, he said, "He's my brother."

They went to a diner across the street and ordered coffee. Ghostface stared down into his cup without drinking. "Ice always was a hard case. He liked the streets too much, he liked the drugs, he liked the thug life. That's why he never made anything of himself." He picked up a spoon, looked at it, set it down. "I dunno. Maybe he did it. Maybe he did."

"You know he didn't. You proved he couldn't have."

"Yeah, but that's not going to convince a judge, now is it?"

Will had to admit it would not. "You guys keep in touch?"

"Not really. I saw him a few months ago. He was all hopped up and talking trash about how he'd finally made a big score. He was going to be smoking hundred-dollar cigars and bedding thousand-dollar whores. Maybe he stole something. I told him to get the hell out, I didn't want to know anything about his criminal activities. My own brother. The last time I saw him, I told him to go to hell."

They were silent for a bit. "Nobody said anything about finding anything valuable," Will observed.

"Sometimes the cops will pocket that kind of stuff."

"That's true." Will dipped a finger in his coffee and drew the Sigil of Inspiration on the linoleum counter. Nothing came to him. He sighed. "What would the Big Guy do in this situation?"

"Him?" Ghostface said bitterly. "Probably hand out cigars."

"Hey." Will sat up straight. "That's not a half bad idea. It's pretty cold out there." He counted cops through the window. Then he called the waitress over. "Give me four large coffees, cream and sugar on the side."

Leaving Ghostface hunched over the counter, Will carried the cardboard tray out to where the police stood stamping their feet to keep warm. They accepted the gift with small nods. All four had dark skin, short horns, and the kind of attitude that came from knowing they'd never, ever make detective. The oldest of the lot said, "Working for the spook, are you?"

"Oh, Salem's okay."

The cop grinned on one side of his oak-brown face. "You're what the micks would call his Hound of Hoolan. You know what that is?"

"No, sir."

"It means that if he says he wants to drive, you bend over and bark."

The cops all laughed. Then three of them wandered away, leaving only the rookie. Will took out a pack of Marlboros, offered one, took one for himself, then lit both. They smoked them down to the end without saying much. Will flicked his butt away. The rookie pinched the coal off of his and ate it.

Finally Will said, "This Buggane guy—you know him?"

"Everybody knew him. A real bad character. In jail as often as not. His girlfriend's cute, though. Used to come to the station to bail him out. Skinny little thing, no tits to speak of. The big lugs always like 'em petite, you ever noticed?"

"Some of the neighbors thought he was queer."

"They sure wouldn't of said that to his face. Buggane was a bruiser. Used to fight some, under the name of Dullahan the Deathless."

"No kidding," Will said. "His gym anywhere around here?"

"Down the street and over a couple of blocks. Place called the Sucker Punch. You can't miss it."

Ghostface was still in the diner, so Will left a note on the dash of the limo. A few minutes later, he was at the Sucker Punch A.C. If there was one thing Will had learned working for Toussaint, it was how to walk through any front door in the world and act as if he had a perfect right to be there. He went in.

The gym was dark and smelled serious. Punching bags hung from the gloom. Somebody grunted in a slow and regular fashion, like a mechanical pig, from the free-weight area. There was a single regulation ring in the center of the room. A trollweight bounced up and down on his toes, shadow-boxing.

"Go home, little boy," an ogre in a pug hat said. "There ain't nothing here for you."

"Oh, it's not about that, sir," Will said quickly. By *that* meaning whatever the ogre thought it meant. The alderman had schooled him never to meet aggression head-on.

"No? You don't wanna build yourself up, get the girl, and beat the crap out of whoever's pushing you around?" The ogre squeezed Will's biceps. "You could use it. Only not here. This is a serious club for serious fighters only."

"No, sir, I'm with Alderman Toussaint." By the ogre's expression, Will could see that he recognized the name and was not impressed. "I was hoping you could tell me something about Bobby Buggane."

"The bum. What's he done now?"

"He was murdered."

"Well, I ain't surprised. Buggane was no damn good. Coulda worked his way up to the middle of the card, but he wasn't willing to put in the effort. Always jerking off somewhere with his spook buddy when he shoulda been working out."

"Somebody said they got into doing crimes together." It was a shot in the dark, but Will figured the odds were good.

"Yeah, well, like I said, I wouldn't be surprised. There's a lot of crap a gorilla like Buggane can pull off if he's got a haint accomplice. You go into a jewelry store and pinch the ward when the guy ain't lookin' and replace it with a sprig of plastic fennel. Looks just like the real thing. Then that night the spook slips in and shuts off the alarm. If you're like Buggane, and can rip a safe door off its hinges, you can walk off with a bundle. Somebody pulled something like that at a warehouse down in the Village about six months ago. Got away with a fortune in slabs of raw jade. I remember it because Buggane quit the gym right after that, and I always wondered."

"Raw jade's got to be hard to sell, though," Will said. "I mean, in bulk."

"Not if you got connections. Even if you don't, something big like that could be moved through your regular fence, provided you waited until things had cooled down some. Not that I'd know personally. But you hear things."

"Huh," Will said. "This girlfriend of his—you remember her name?"

"Naw. Daiera, Damia, something like that. Maybe Danae. Only reason I recollect at all is that I asked Buggane once was she a pixie or a russalka or what and he said she was a diener. Deianira the Diener, that was it. That's a new one on me. I thought I knew all the ethnics, but I ain't never heard of a diener before. Listen, kid, I really have got work to do."

"I'll be out of your way, then," Will said. "Thanks for your help." He took one last look around the gym. "I guess Buggane should have stayed in the ring."

"Oh, he wasn't a ring boxer," the ogre said. "He was a pit boxer."

"What's the difference?"

"Pit boxing's strictly death-match. Two fighters climb down, only one climbs out. Buggane had a three-and-two record when he quit."

"How the fuck," Will said, "can somebody have a three-and-two record when he's fighting to the death?"

The ogre grinned. Then he explained.

Less than an hour later, Will, Salem Toussaint, and Ghostface stood waiting in the shadows outside the city morgue. "Okay," Ghostface said. "I thought I knew all the racial types from Litvak night-hags to Thai shit demons, but you say this girl is a *what*?"

"A diener. It's not a type, it's a job. A diener is a morgue attendant who's responsible for moving and cleaning the body. She also assists the coroner in the autopsy. I made a few calls and Deianira's on night duty this week. Though I'm guessing she might take off a little early tonight."

"Why's that?"

"This is where Bobby Buggane's body wound up."

"I think, boy," Toussaint said firmly, "you'd best tell us the whole story."

"All right," Will said. "Here's how I put it together. Buggane and Ice steal a truckload of jewelry-grade jade together and agree to wait six months before trying to fence it. Buggane keeps possession—I'm guessing it's stashed with his girlfriend, but that's not really important—and everyone has half a year to reflect on how much bigger Buggane's share will be if he stiffs Ice. Maybe Ice starts worrying about it out loud. So Buggane goes down to the basement to talk it over with his good buddy. They have a couple of drinks, maybe they smoke a little crack. Then he breaks out the crystal goon. By this time, your brother's lost whatever good judgment he had in the first place, and says sure."

Ghostface nodded glumly.

"Ice shoots up first, then Buggane. Only he shoots up pure water. That's easy to pull—what druggie's going to suspect another druggie of short-changing *himself*? Then, when Ice nods off, Buggane goes back to his room, takes down the ward, and flushes it down the toilet. That way, when he's found dead, suspicion's naturally going to fall on the only individual in the building able to walk through a locked door. One who he's made certain will be easy to find when the police come calling."

"So who kills Buggane?"

"It's a set-up job. Buggane opens the window halfway and checks to make sure his girlfriend is waiting in the alley. Everything's ready. Now he stages a fight. He screams, roars, pounds the wall, smashes a chair. Then, when the neighbors are all yelling at him to shut up, he goes to the window, takes a deep breath, and rips open his rib cage with his bare hands."

"Can he *do* that?"

"Boggarts are strong, remember. Plus, if you checked out the syringe on his dresser, I wouldn't be surprised to find traces not of goon but of morphine. Either way, with or without painkiller, he tears out his own heart. Then he drops it out the window. Deianira catches it in a basket or a sheet, so there's no blood on the ground. Nothing that will direct the investigators' attention outside.

"She leaves with his heart.

"Now Buggane's still got a couple of minutes before he collapses. He's smart enough not to close the window—there'd be blood on the outside part of the sill and that would draw attention outward again. But his hands are slick with blood and he doesn't want the detectives to realize he did the deed himself, so he goes to the bathroom sink and washes them. By this time, the concierge is hammering on the door.

"He dies. Everything is going exactly according to plan."

"Hell of a plan," Toussaint murmured.

"Yeah. You know the middle part. The cops come, they see, they believe. If it wasn't for Ghostface kicking up a fuss, we'd never have found all this other stuff."

"Me? I didn't do anything."

"Well, it looked hinky to me, but I wasn't going to meddle in police business until I learned it mattered to you."

"You left out the best part," Toussaint said. "How Buggane manages to turn killing himself to his own advantage."

"Yeah, that had me baffled too. But when a boxer picks up a nickname like 'the Deathless,' you have to wonder why. Then the ogre at the gym told me that Buggane had a three-two record pit boxing. That's to the death, you know. It turns out Buggane's got a glass heart. Big lump of crystal the size of your fist. No matter how badly he's injured, the heart can repair him. Even if he's clinically dead."

"So his girlfriend waits for his body to show up and sticks the heart back in?" Ghostface said. "No, that's just crazy. That wouldn't really work, would it?"

"Shhh," Will said. "I think we're about to find out. Look."

A little door opened in the side of the morgue. Two figures came out. The smaller one was helping the larger to stand.

For the first time all evening, Toussaint smiled. Gold teeth gleamed. Then he put a police whistle to his mouth.

After Buggane and his girlfriend had been arrested, Ghostface gave Will a short, fierce hug and then ran off to arrange his brother's release. Will and the alderman strolled back to the limousine, parked two blocks away. As they walked, Will worried how he was going to explain to his boss that he couldn't chauffeur because he didn't have a license.

"You done good, boy," Salem Toussaint said. "I'm proud of you."

Something in his voice, or perhaps the amused way he glanced down at Will out of the corner of his eye, said more than mere words could have.

"You *knew*," Will said. "You knew all the time."

Toussaint chuckled. "Perhaps I did. But I had the advantage of knowing what the city knows. It was still mighty clever of you to figure it out all on your own."

"But why should I have had to? Why didn't you just tell the detectives what you knew?"

"Let me answer that question with one of my own: Why did you tell Ghostface he was the one who uncovered the crime?"

They'd reached the limo now. It flickered its lights, glad to see them. But they didn't climb in just yet. "Because I've got to live with the guy. I don't want him thinking I think I'm superior to him."

"Exactly so! The police liked hearing the story from a solid boy better than they would from me. I'm not quite a buffoon in their eyes, but I'm something close to it. My power has to be respected, and my office too. It would make folks nervous if they had to take me seriously as well."

"Alderman, I . . ."

"Hush up, boy. I know everything you're about to say." The alderman opened a door for Will. "Climb in the back. I'll drive." O

"Who Is Isaac Asimov?"

"I was an unpublished gonnabe writer back in 1977 when the first issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* appeared. Since it came out during a convention that Asimov attended, I joined the little throng that materialized about him in the hallway to get his autograph on the cover. Because I was nobody in particular and rather acutely aware of it, I was last in line. So it was just we two when the convention's guest of honor, a writer who had rocketed up out of nowhere, but whose name I won't mention, passed by, surrounded by sycophants and well wishers. 'Look at that,' Asimov said quietly, handing me back my magazine. 'A year ago, everybody was saying, 'Who is So-and-So?' And ten years from now, they're all going to be saying, 'Who is Isaac Asimov?'"

"'Oh, bullshit!' I said reflexively. But Asimov didn't hear me. He was staring off into the future at his oncoming oblivion.

"I realized then that if I tiptoed away immediately, I could always claim to be the man who said 'Bullshit!' to Isaac Asimov and left him speechless. So I did.

"It's been thirty years and in this one respect I proved a better prophet than the master. He isn't forgotten—far from it. Not only are his books still in print, but every month the magazine that bears his name comes out and is read everywhere. I have yet to hear anybody pick it up and ask, 'Who is Isaac Asimov?'"

—Michael Swanwick

WOLVES OF THE SPIRIT

Liz Williams

Liz Williams is a science fiction and fantasy writer living in Glastonbury, England, where she is co-director of a witchcraft supply shop. In the US, her novels and story collections have been published by Bantam Spectra and Nightshade Books. Liz appears regularly in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Asimov's*, and other magazines. In her latest tale, she takes an icy look at some haunting songs and some ominous . . .

I am the keeper of the Baille Atha light now that my mother is dead, a princess in an ice-colored tower. My kingdom is the last hummock of land before the wastes of the Western Ocean, the final island before Darkland, and the enemy, and the start of storms.

Generations of women, generations of lighthouse keepers. It's all kept in a book, a real one, bound with leather and iron as well as being stored in the computer database of the light. The book isn't necessary, of course, and neither is it necessary for a living person to tend a lighthouse—they'd even stopped it on old Earth, long before we left for the stars, but something about Muspell, something about the sea and the mist and the ice, the way that ships vanish between midnight and morning, the way that you hear a sudden voice on the open ocean, seems to have convinced my ancestors that you need a living soul in a lighthouse, a small stand against the dark.

And there's a lot of darkness, on Muspell.

My mother hated the winters here, the short bleak days followed by the quick fall of the sun, and she loved the long light summers, with the Northern Fire playing greengold above the horizon and the sky flowering with the summer stars. But I am the opposite, liking the stormy nights and the crash of dark, restless in summer with the gleaming length of days.

Shoredwellers always ask if you become lonely, out on the ice. They don't realize that you are never alone: the weather is always with you, and the sea, and these are the great presences beyond the smaller spirits, of birds and sealstock and the selk. And others, too: once I went out

onto the field at the end of winter to see an old woman standing at the very end of the crags, above the sea. She raised a hand and waved to someone, but when I reached her, she was no longer there.

You would have thought that I'd have dreamed of a man, coming across the sea to claim me, a young girl's dreams, but I was content with what I had. There seemed enough time for that; I would wait, I told myself, until I became lonely, but somehow I never did.

Then, one day, a man did come.

This is the way things are done. My own father was an island-man from Haut-terre, blown off course by the equinoctial gales, his little boat crashing onto the rocks beneath the lighthouse. My mother nursed him back to health; they fell in love, she fell pregnant.

He left anyway, when the next provisions drop came. They winched him up onto the copter and that, my mother said, was the last she saw of him. She cried, but not for long. There was too much to do. He did not come back.

She stayed, and brought me up, here at the Baille Atha light. We were not confined to the lighthouse itself. We would skate out across the green expanse to where the birds are, so thick along the ice cliffs that the air is one great shriek. And beyond the birds are the selk, and in winter, the selk sing.

Until the arrival of the man, I heard them only once, when I was a child and my mother had taken me out onto the icefield.

"Mother?" I said, when we had skated almost as far as the edge of the cliffs, our high-proof slickskins barely keeping out the cold. "Where are we going?"

And she said, "Why, we're going to the end of the world."

Beyond the cliff, the sea was like metal. As we reached the top and looked out over miles of silver water, the seabirds came up in a cloud and settled back down again. Their shrieking ended. The icefield was suddenly very quiet.

"Why have they stopped?" I asked. I looked up at my mother's face behind the translucent film of her slickskin; it was rapt and distant, her grey eyes fixed on the far horizon.

"Why?" I asked again, but she ignored me.

I didn't know what it was when I first heard it. It was thin and high, as cold as the wind. It drifted out across the icefield and we stood still in its path, frozen in the wake of sudden song.

"Mama?" but I never knew whether I had spoken the word aloud or whether the song had conjured it, was speaking to me out of the air. But my mother reached out and took my hand and drew me forward, to the very lip of the ice.

The sea churned, hundreds of feet below. I felt dizzy if I looked down, so I stared ahead instead, out to the bright line between sea and sky, and let the song go on.

My mother nudged me. "There. Can you see them?"

I looked down, wished I hadn't, but she was holding tightly onto my arm and then I realized that the song itself would not let me fall.

The selk lay on the rocks below. They are nothing like the sirens of old Earth: there is little that is womanly or fair about them, although they were interbred with human genes. Like seals, but larger and more tapered, with front paws that are almost hands and with which they are able to manipulate basic tools. But they had no real need of tools, not with that song. It crept into my head and it spoke to me of the northern seas, the deep green, the dive and the rush. Listening to that song, I knew what it was like to be something other than myself.

I don't know why they stopped. Perhaps they glimpsed us far above and took us for predators. But abruptly, their song ended and they slid over the edge of the rocks and into the water, *one, two, three*. A ripple marked the point of their dive and we did not see them again. The weather was changing, a storm driving down out of the north, and we skated fast before it, arriving back at the lighthouse just as the first flakes of snow hit. We locked the doors behind us and looked out at white sea, white sky.

"There," I said. "That place, the cliffs. Is it really where the world ends?"

"No," my mother replied. "Beyond the sea is Darkland, the home of our enemies, where the vitki come from."

"The vitki," I said. I'd heard the word before; my mother had used it to frighten me, when I was younger: *don't go out on the ice alone, the vitki will come, they will take you away and change you into something terrible*.

"Who *are* the vitki?" I asked now, and my mother answered, "They are the wolves of the spirit."

But that night, I dreamed of the selk, and of songs.

When I was nineteen, my mother died, of an infection in the lungs that might have been cured if she had lived on the shore. But the winter storms had come again and we were too far from a medical center. She went downhill fast, so quickly that I could not believe it, and I do not think I believed until several days after I had sent her body, in its burial pod, down into the green depths of the sea. I used to see her all the same, standing by the light, a younger woman than I had ever known, and nothing about this ever struck me as strange.

I ordered supplies, and a replacement pod, and carried on. That spring, I went out onto the ice again, finding a freedom in not having to ask permission of anyone, and visited the selk, but I did not hear them sing, neither that year, nor any year that followed. I dreamed of it, all the same.

When the man appeared, I did not know at first whether he was real. I was used to ghosts, by then. I took up the binoculars and watched him trudge over the ice: an ordinary fisherman's slickskin, a half-moon of face under the hood. He was dragging something behind him, something grey.

I went down to the intercom. Moments later, his voice came through.

"Is anyone there?"

"I'm the lighthouse keeper. My name is Siri Clathe. Do you have ID?"

The scan glowed blue and data showed on the screen: Edri Lailoken, out of Harkness, the registry numbers of a fishing rigger.

"You'll do," I said to Edri Lailoken through the intercom, and opened the door.

He wasn't so much older than I was, perhaps ten years or so, in his ear-

ly thirties. When he pulled back the hood I saw blue eyes, dark hair, a face that was all harsh, sharp angles. But he had a winning smile.

"I've got a problem," he told me. "Got blown down out of Uist last night; my rigger's a wreck. Spring gales, you see. Come up faster than the eye can blink."

"Where is it?"

He gestured towards the northwest of the icefield. "Up there, at the base of the cliff."

"You were lucky," I said.

He grimaced. "You won't say that when you see the rigger."

He dumped a small pack on the floor and moved to open it, and it was then that I saw what he'd been dragging across the ice.

Dapple and pale, like a shadow made flesh. I felt as though he'd brought in the flayed skin of a man.

He saw me looking. "I know." His voice was very quiet. "I found it. Someone's been hunting."

"I'll have to report this." I felt sick. "The spring equinox was a fortnight ago—you know they're sentient, now?"

"Of course. But Siri, there are plenty of folk even in the Reach who think the selk are nothing more than animals. Even when they plead for mercy under a hunter's club."

"Why did they leave the skin?" I forced myself to look at it.

"Maybe they're just after the meat—but I think it's more likely to be *this*." He tugged the skin over and I saw the black bands around it. "See? It's a young one. The pelt-merchants don't like the banding, it's not fashionable."

"So they just dumped it."

I could see the disgust in his eyes. It had struck me, of course, that he'd been the one to kill the selk, but that expression convinced me otherwise. "You need to get someone out here, Siri."

"I don't know if they'll come for only one selk." The culls were another matter; I'd seen those on the newsfeeds, the ice running red, the pups begging for their lives.

"It won't be just one. It's so far out here, I suppose they thought they'd be undisturbed. Would you have gone out there, in this weather?"

I shook my head. "I'll put that report through," I said, and did so.

Communications this far out are often subject to delay. It was evening before I got a reply, telling me that the report had been filed and a response would be with me in the next couple of days.

"When is the next provision copter through?" Lailoken asked.

"Another week."

"I'm afraid in that case, you'll just have to put up with me, Siri."

He said it with a smile. A lot can happen in a week, the thought came to me.

"When I sent my first story to Asimov's, I thought it didn't have a hope. I literally could not believe the acceptance letter; it was rather like slipping into a parallel universe. Things haven't changed much.

"Great going to all of you and happy thirtieth!"

—Liz Williams

On the following morning, we went out to look at Lailoken's rigger.

"I'm taking this." I showed him the harpoon gun, the only weapon I had. "Just in case the hunters are still around."

He gave a grave nod. "Good idea. I don't have anything with me—I had a small weapon, but it's still in the rigger; I couldn't get at it."

When I saw his craft, I knew why. Looking down from the top of the cliff, the prow of the rigger had been stoved in and it was sinking. The back half was already submerged.

"You were really lucky to have made it up the cliff," I said. "There's no way we're going to be able to drag that up."

Lailoken cursed. "It'll be gone by the time we can get a rescue copter out here and anyway, I'd have to pay. Oh well. It's insured, at least."

"Will you get the full amount back?"

He snorted. "I pay a high enough premium."

When we got back to the lighthouse Lailoken, with an air of resignation, asked if I had a spare fishing rod. I watched him walk across the ice, a graceful prow, and chop a hole in the ice with a borrowed prong.

A fish supper, in pleasant company. Maybe I'd been lonelier than I'd thought.

I had a number of tasks to do around the light: basic maintenance. I went down into the base area to fetch some equipment; the skin of the selk was still there, folded as neatly as I could manage it, and so was Lailoken's pack. We'd made up a bed for him on the couch.

As I crossed the room, I heard a whisper.

Iskir. Iskir.

It was surprisingly loud and it startled me. I looked around, but nothing was there. My head rang with it. *Iskir.*

"Who's there?" I said aloud.

The whisper came again and it was coming from the pack. I was an idiot, I told myself. Lailoken must have a radio in there. Not much use, however, if the battery went flat. I didn't like rummaging about in his bag, but I opened it a little way anyway.

There was no radio. A handful of clothing, a spare slickskin, a long, flat parcel in a waterproof wrapping, that whispered, *Iskir, Iskir.*

I flicked the parcel open and snatched my hand back. There was blood on it, from a thin, shallow cut. I put my hand to my mouth and, carefully, drew the wrapping aside. Inside, was a long black knife: black blade, black shaft. It looked almost of a piece, the metal and bone blending into one another so seamlessly that I had to look hard for a join. My mouth flooded with the taste of iron.

I had a small weapon, but it's still in the rigger.

The door hummed and I hastily shoved the bag shut. Lailoken stood in the entrance with a brace of limmerel, his face wind-reddened and smiling.

"They're shoaling. You could almost pull them out of the water."

"Oh, well done." My voice sounded almost normal, I found to my surprise. I kept my injured hand out of sight, behind my back. "That's dinner settled, then."

Perhaps this was what marriage was like, all cheer and plans for sup-

per, with the hiss of secrets underneath. I got through the next few hours with difficulty, and excused myself shortly after dinner. I told Lailoken I'd cut myself on a weathered sheet of metal. He seemed hardly to hear me.

My mother might have lived alone, apart from me, but that didn't mean that she didn't communicate. She had friends all over the Reach: on the message boards and the genealogy lists. One of them was a sea marshal named Kari Shoar. I sent her a message, then went to bed and tried to sleep.

I could still hear it, in my restless dreams. *Iskir, Iskir.*

Around three AM, I found myself wide awake. The *message-in* section of the console was blinking. I went to look at what Shoar had written.

I've not met Edri Lailoken myself. Some of the older guys here know him, though he hasn't been out with the boats for years, since his accident. They say he's a miserable old bugger, keeps himself to himself. What's he doing all the way out at the Baille Atha light?

I hadn't voiced my suspicions yet, but I did so then. I did not feel able to handle this on my own. I needed help and I asked Shoar to send a sea marshal out, or come herself. Why would you take on someone else's identity, unless you had something to hide? And besides, identity theft in the Reach is not an easy matter. Not easy, or cheap.

I did not sleep for the remainder of that night. There was no further reply from Shoar; her part of the Reach was several hours ahead of Baille Atha, and she had probably gone on shift. I watched the moon drift down over the ocean, sliding into its own silver track, and still the whispering went on.

Towards dawn, there was a flicker of green in the corner of my eye. *Message-in*, I thought, and ran to the console. But it was on another array to the communications console - a small emerald light, telling me that the main door of the lighthouse had been opened.

I should have waited. I should have locked myself into the lighthouse, a princess in my tower, and made sure that the override switches were on lock. Because I knew what Lailoken was, now, and where that black blade had come from: a land of dark glass cliffs, of echoing forests, of experiments and spells.

Should have waited, but did not. I thought of that sad piled pelt in the base of the lighthouse, of the selk singing at the ocean's edge, and I could not stay. I picked up the harpoon gun on my way out; he had not taken it with him. I suppose he did not need to. I also checked his bag. The knife was gone.

In the cold glow just before the dawn, the spires and pinnacles of ice gleamed green with their own faint phosphorescence. Lailoken had left no tracks in the snow, and that nearly made me turn back to the reassuring column of the lighthouse. But I went on, following the whisper of the knife in my mind, and at last I came to that same cliff, that my mother had called the edge of the world.

Lailoken was nowhere to be seen. Cautiously, I made my way to the lip of the cliff and looked over. The ice field extended some distance out from the shore, a thin spring sheet, and he was already halfway across it. Ahead, shadowy shapes marked the rocks. The selk were there. I raised the harpoon and measured a shot but he was out of range. I could see how

he'd made his way down the cliff, the handholds. It was still dark enough that he might not see me even if he looked back, or so I prayed. I shouldered the gun and went after him.

When I was almost at the bottom of the cliff, and Lailoken's figure was approaching the rocks on which the selk lay, something changed. The world around me became colder and seemed to darken, but at the same time, I could see more clearly. I caught a glimpse of Lailoken's face, as if I was kneeling before him. It was white and rapt against the pre-dawn sky and I knew that I was seeing through the knife itself, through Iskir. My blood hammered and pounded in my head and I came close to falling. I snatched at a handhold of ice, half caught it, and slid the rest of the way, luckily only a few feet, to the base of the cliff.

Down here, the rocks were slippery, like wet glass. I did not know how Lailoken had made such quick progress and my fear of him grew. I saw his face again and he was speaking, whispering to the knife as someone might whisper to a lover. Something pushed against the world; I had the sense of force—and then the song began.

This time, it was not wordless. The selk, sentient now, was singing in its own tongue of Shelta. I did not understand it, but I could grasp repeats, refrains—and Iskir did understand, I somehow knew, and was spinning the song out of the selk like a long skein of blood.

Lailoken gave a single shout, a cry of triumph. He raised Iskir, brought it down through the air. I had a dizzying rush, cleaving the air with the knife, as it cut the song. Lailoken's other hand held a bag; the song fell into it. From across the icefield, there was a heavy, echoing splash as the selk rolled and fell. And I dragged the harpoon from my shoulder, aimed and fired.

The world slowed down. Lailoken turned as the bolt glided towards him and I saw his face, clearly at last. He looked nothing like the blue-eyed, black-haired young man from whom I'd sat across a table, eating limmerel. I don't know what he looked like, except that I wouldn't have described it as human. The bolt crept on and Lailoken smiled and stepped unhurriedly out of the way.

"Iskir!" I cried. "Iskir!" My voice sounded thick in my mouth. Lailoken's smile widened, but out on the rocks, something stirred. A selk was singing.

It wasn't the plaintive, desolate song of a few minutes before. Lailoken's spell had been broken just long enough, the knife's concentration shifting. This was a war song.

My hands hammered at my ears. I dropped to my knees. Time came back in a rush and the harpoon bolt sailed past Lailoken and struck a spire of ice, which shattered. But the ice was shattering, too, thin splintering cracks stemming out from where Lailoken, suddenly, was flailing for balance.

It happened quickly after that: the ice breaking, Iskir flying from Lailoken's hand like a black arrow, the vitki going down, down, into the killing sea. The selk's song stopped as abruptly as it had begun. I was crouching, my forehead nearly touching the ice. A few yards from me, where the ice was unbroken, Iskir skittered to a halt and lay waiting.

After a moment, I became aware that the pounding sound in my head wasn't my own blood, after all, but the rotor blades of a sea marshal's copter, landing above me on the cliff. Slowly, I got to my feet. I stepped out onto the ice, picked up Iskir, and put it in a fold of my slickskin. It felt slippery, as if coated with blood. Then I climbed back up the cliff to where Marshal Shoar was waiting.

An hour later, she and I went back up to the northwest quadrant of the icefield. It was not long past dawn, with a strong morning wind blowing offshore. Together, Shoar and I looked over the cliff to where the wrecked rigger lay. It was not wrecked now. It hovered slightly above the surface of the water, quite safe, with the flicker of a dying holo-form shuddering over it. In the moments where the holo-form was failing, I saw that it was nothing like a fishing rigger, but a thin craft. I'd never seen anything similar before, but Shoar nodded when she saw it.

"Vitki," was all that she said.

"He wanted me to file the report about the skin," I said. "He was prepared for someone to come."

"Arrogance," she said. But she did not sound sure. Then she added, "Perhaps he wanted a copter."

Her team took the rigger back with them to Uist, proof of enemy incursions into the Reach. The Baille Atha lighthouse was put on the nearest marshal's sea patrol and now a wing comes over perhaps every three days or so, undergoing routine checks. But Lailoken still walks the ice, head down in its vitki hood, stumbling along as if looking for something. I can see the ice spires through his body; I have seen no need to alert the sea patrol to his presence.

I keep Iskir in a metal box, up in the light near the storms and the sky. Sometimes, I take the knife out and look at it; it seems to grow harder, more solid, year by year. I have not told the sea patrol about Iskir, either. For if another wolf of the spirit should come, searching for a knife that can cut a song from the air, I think I would like to see just how far Iskir can pare, spiraling flesh and blood and bone away, all the way down to the cold hollow of an enemy soul. ○

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THE EATER OF DREAMS

Robert Silverberg

Robert Silverberg's new story collection, *To Be Continued*, was published by Subterranean Press late last year. It's the first volume in what is intended as a nine-volume set of Bob's collected (not complete!) science fiction stories. This first volume covers stories written between 1953 and 1958. Obviously, it will take a while before we see the volume that includes this latest tale by our resident Grand Master.

The Queen-Goddess feels another dream coming to her tonight, and she knows it will be a dark one. So I am summoned to her, masked in the mask of my profession, and I crouch by her pallet, awaiting the night. The Queen-Goddess sleeps, lying asprawl like a child's discarded doll. At the foot of the bed lurks the Vizier in his horned mask: our chaperone. No man, not even the royal Eater of Dreams, may enter the Queen-Goddess' bedchamber unescorted.

Her spirit flutters and trembles. Her eyes move quickly beneath their lids. She is reaching the dream-world now. Her dreams are always true visions. Therefore she suffers when a dark one comes, for such dreams acquaint her with pain and grief, and we suffer when she suffers, since all things flow to us through the spirit of the Queen-Goddess. What she will bring us after such a dream is pain and grief. We cannot abide pain or grief; and so I must take her dark dreams from her as swiftly as I can.

Last night she dreamed—she could not communicate it well to me—of ashes and ruin, of ugliness and shame, of strife and sadness. From her vague description, I knew that she has been ranging through ancient times again. She often makes contact with some epoch of the distant pre-Imperial past, that era of apocalyptic nightmare out of which our own shining civilization emerged. Last night's dream, for which, alas, I was not summoned in time, has cast its shadow over today's flow of beneficial energy. If another like it comes tonight, I will be here to guard her majesty against it.

And, yes, yes, the dream is coming, and it is the same.

Surely her majesty has slipped once more into the black abyss of time

past. I say the words that unlock the portals of her spirit, link my mind with hers, and see a fearful strangeness. The stars, of which she gives me just the most fleeting of glimpses before her gaze turns away from them, seem to have an unfamiliar look: the constellations I so quickly see do not appear to be the constellations we know today. They must be those of some long-ago epoch. The stars in their courses travel great distances over time.

And what I behold under these strange skies is bleakness and horror. We are in a hideous city. It is an era I have never seen in her dreams before, an awful one. The buildings are brutal towers, looming inexorably. On myriad interlacing roadways, vehicles move like swarming beetles. I see an ashen sky; I see stunted trees with blackened leaves; I see hordes of people with faces twisted in anguish. The air itself has a poisonous-looking pall. It is the past, yes; it is one of those dark predecessor civilizations, ridden with pain and error, out of which we have emerged into sunlight and joy. What can this terrible ancient era be, if not the dreadful world of eight, ten, twelve thousand years ago, that grim time so proud of the frenzied, furious industriousness that its builders mistook for wealth, from which the benevolence of her majesty's dynasty has emancipated us all forever?

"Majesty," I say softly. "Give me this dream."

I utter the words of transfer and the dream enters me in all its fury. For a moment I recoil; but I am skilled in my art, and quickly I engulf the images, neutralize them, dissipate them, and then it is over and I am rising, trembling, drenched in sweat, fighting nausea. It will take me a while to recover. But I am used to that. Her majesty's face is tranquil. She sleeps like a happy child. The Vizier comes to me and we embrace, mask against mask. "Well done," he says. "But I fear this is not the last of them."

The day that follows is a happy one. Strength and joy flow from her majesty from dawn to dusk. It is a day of golden sunlight, of cloudless skies, of unfolding blossoms and rising fragrance. The great lawns sweeping down to the river have never looked greener; the river's pure flow is a celestial blue. We are a blessed people. We will not make the mistakes of yesteryear. Our civilization will endure eternally.

But at midnight the Vizier summons me again.

"Another," he says. "The third night. This one will be the worst."

Smiling, I tell him, "Whatever it is, I am ready."

Indeed I am. For sixty years now I have guarded her majesty against the terrors of the night, and we have moved together from triumph to triumph. In the privacy of my soul I flatter myself with the thought that I am essential to the realm—that, without my diligence and skill, the Queen-Goddess would be ridden nightly by horror and torment and all the world would be the worse for that.

This is the shortest, by a good many thousands of words, of the two dozen or so stories I've had in *Asimov's* over the years. But that doesn't mean it's insignificant, at least not to me, because writing it qualified me for a place in this very special issue. It's an honor to be here, no matter what the length of the story.

—Robert Silverberg

I don my mask. The Vizier dons his. The Queen, ever youthful, ever beautiful, is asleep. Signs of tension are visible on her brow. The dream is coming. I say the words. The link is formed.

It comes now, the dream.

Her wandering mind has entered that same ancient era, but this night there are significant differences. The brutal towers now are shattered: charred stumps are everywhere. Those interlacing roads are twisted and broken. Vehicles lie piled in rusting heaps along their margins. The air is black and oily. The citizens—there are just a few in the ruined streets—have a dazed, stunned look. Some dreadful thing has happened. The dreaming mind of the Queen-Goddess must have found the very end of the former era, the disastrous climactic time of the Great Collapse, when all assumptions were overthrown and the corrosive prosperity of the day tumbled overnight into that dreary poverty out of which, after so many centuries, our Imperial government created the serene, lovely epoch in which we live today.

It is a much more powerful vision than last night's, and I know that afterward I will reverberate with it for hours, but so be it. I will take it from her and all will be well. "Majesty," I say, as ever. "Give me—"

But then her head shifts, and she murmurs in her sleep, and the perspective changes and she shows me the sky, not the brief glimpse of last night but a long, slow, clear view, and everything is wrong. The moon, our familiar pockmarked moon, is a chipped and broken thing, and the stars whose patterns I have studied so well are not the stars of some vanished yesterday nor the stars of today but stars strung across the sky in some utterly unknown configuration. And in that moment all my strength leaves me, for I know this dream to be too huge to swallow. It is the future, not the past, through which the Queen-Goddess walks tonight, and what it shows is that the cycle of destruction will come round again, that our green and golden era that we thought to be invulnerable will not last eternally after all, that we too will be swept away as all earlier civilizations of Earth have been swept away. I can protect her against the past, but there is no way I can stave off the onrushing future, and I fling my mask aside and crouch and weep while the Vizier, maskless and stunned as well, comes hurrying to my side. ○

SOULAR

A new radar detector
that has recently been invented
can not only detect rainbows

as was its original intention

but also has the unexpected
yet astonishing power
of seeing people's souls.

While meteorologists
and weather enthusiasts
are all aglow
about this innovation,



blithely code-named Soular,
civic and church authorities
are looking leerily
at this new invention.

Church Officials,
are distressed about meteorologists
meddling in matters
previously the domain
of people of the cloth,

not to mention
it being somewhat unethical
to have lay-people
voyeuristically gawking
into a person's soul.

The Surgeon General
has also become involved
and recommended against
government approval.

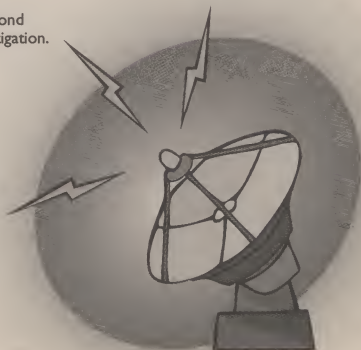
Her rationale:

The soul has never before
been considered
a bodily part
and is therefore beyond
their scope of investigation.

In addition,
The Civil Liberties Union
has intervened
and asked for a court injunction
to put a stop
to test trials of this new mechanism.

Under the Fourth Amendment
of the Constitution
this is considered
an invasion of personal privacy.
The Constitution holds it
illegal to search
a person's house,
and the body being a "temple"
makes it unlawful
to peer into a person's
most vital essence.

—Peter Payack



THE ROCKET INTO PLANETARY SPACE

William Barton

Over the past thirty-five years, William Barton has written numerous science fiction stories, including the award-winning novel *Acts of Conscience* (Warner Aspect, 1997) and several stories for *Asimov's*, most recently, "Down to the Earth Below" (October/November 2006). Regarding "The Rocket into Planetary Space," he says, "I am, as the clever comedian once said, The Luckiest Boy in the World! I was seven years old when Sputnik 1 orbited the Earth, and only ten when Yuri Gagarin flew. I was fourteen when Mariner IV sent back those first magical photos of Mars, eighteen when Apollo 8 orbited the Moon and still eighteen when Eagle set down on the Sea of Tranquility. I was twenty-five when Viking 1 landed on Mars and twenty-seven when the two Voyagers left for the stars. When I was thirty, I stood just three miles from the launch pad and watched STS-1 *Columbia* climb heavenward on a column of fiery smoke. What followed was *Challenger* exploding when I was thirty-five, then the Endless Space Station of my forties, then my own *Columbia* falling to pieces over Texas when I was fifty-two, and I began to feel cheated. Cheated out of the universe Asimov, Heinlein, and all the others promised me when I was that little boy, breathless in front of the TV news. This story is about why I changed my mind, and why I feel so very lucky to have lived here and now, after all."

This is the way things turned out for Burke the Jerk. If things can turn out this way for someone like me, there's hope for us all. And I always did believe an elephant can fly . . .

On September 7, 2016, just three weeks before my sixty-sixth birthday, when I should've been retired and tucked safely away in a Geezer Storage Facility somewhere down on the Grand Strand of South Carolina, or living under a bridge somewhere if things had gone that badly, maybe even safely dead, I was strapped into a canvas bucket seat in front of the systems engineer's console in the forward cupola of the node we'd mounted to the front of *Excelsior*, our shiny new SpaceHab Apex 400 cargo module, watching the fat, flat Pacific roll by, five hundred clicks straight down.

Excelsior. I remember how everyone razzed me about that when I proposed it. My wife Sarah'd said, Isn't that wood shavings or something? True. But in Latin, it means *Higher*.

The world's a fairly featureless place from low equatorial orbit, which passes over Brazil and Congo and not much else. Most everything cool looking is in the northern hemisphere, or down around the south pole. Sure, the Andes are spectacular enough, and you can see Kilimanjaro sticks up part way, but what the hell. I thought they should've put the Bigelow Exodus orbital hotel in polar orbit, give folks something to look at, once they got tired of the novelty of a zero-gee honeymoon, but equatorial's the best place to toss inflatables from the Rocketplane Kistler K-1 site at Woomera, easy to reach by Dragon from SpaceX's Falcon-9 pads on Kwajalein. Maybe when they get the second one built, and the launch site outside Vegas in a few years?

My pal Willy Gillooly was at the pilot's console, neatly bundled up in one of the used launch and entry suits we'd picked up cheap from Roskosmos, one hand on the rotational controller, watching his console clock count backward toward zero. He had the helmet open and thrown back onto the nape of his neck, and I always thought Willy looked like some old Dick Tracy character, um . . . Flattop? That's one. Skinniest guy I ever met, face as bony as Michael Rennie playing Klaatu. Nice as hell, though. And smart. Way smarter than me.

From the bulkhead speaker, Minnie, voice squeakier than usual, said, "CNN is starting its satellite feed. Turn on your TV." Willy claims his wife got that name because her parents thought she looked like Minnie Pearl when she was a baby, but what newborn ever looks like anything but a space alien? You know damn well it was something to do with the Voice of the Mouse.

Minnie was going to ride out the burn in *Smaug*'s reentry module, sort of as a safety measure, and I suppose Sarah should've done the same with *Fafnir*, but she wanted to sit at her astrogator's console with us, and here she was. Our two SpaceX Dragons were hard-docked to the two y-axis ports on the node, and, theoretically at least, anything that might tear them loose would most likely kill us all. Still, you never know.

I hit the power button on the TV, and the CNN anchor's sharp voice proclaimed, "This is Chelsea Clanton, bringing you a Live Scoop, direct from the Bigelow Exodus, high above the Pacific Ocean!"

On the screen, what you could see was the broad curve of the Earth, mainly blue, with a complex swirl of white clouds, Hawaii visible as a hazy bit of crud up by the northern limb. In the foreground was a little tiny thing looked like some kind of toy.

Willy said, "Jeez, we're only ten clicks away! Don't these guys know about telephoto lenses?"

All you could really see was the United Launch Alliance Delta V second stage, which we'd had launched out of Kourou without a payload, meaning most of the fuel for the six RL-10B engines had made it to orbit too. We'd sent up the Apex 400, both Dragons, and the three Xcor Prometheus methane/LOX propulsion modules on three separate Falcon 9S9 launches.

Turned out to be a lot harder than we expected, getting it all bolted together.

On TV, Ms. Clanton was yammering, "You're looking at *Excelsior*, the world's first manned interplanetary expedition, developed and assembled in secret by a privately funded consortium of space scientists," I heard Willy, conservative as Goldwater's Ghost, snort as she went on, "Bound today for a secret destination, somewhere beyond the Moon!"

Behind me, I heard Sarah sing, "Some-where, beyond the Moooon. . .!"

It'd been hard to come up with the six hundred thirty million dollars for this, and when we first thought of it ten years ago, it seemed like a ridiculous idea. Still, the Gates Foundation gives away that much and more every month, year in, year out, and one month in '09 we convinced them to give us a bit of a boost.

Minnie said, "The CNN producer says you need to start the audio feed, Alan."

I hit that button too.

Sarah giggled and Willy snorted, then they both sobered up.

Willy said, "Go for interplanetary injection. Thirty seconds."

I started paying attention to my console. Willy's main job is to hold the stick and make sure the Delta V guidance package is doing what Sarah says it needs to do. Me? Well. I wrote *Excelsior's* flight software, and I left myself in the loop.

Willy said, "Ten seconds," and damn if his voice didn't sound tight.

"Ten, Willy. Astro?"

Sarah said, "Go."

"Rescue?"

Minnie said, "Go."

Willy said, "Five."

I was tempted to call "Guide-o," and then answer myself, in an attack of the nervous sillies, but I said, "Valves open at tank-head idle."

"Zero."

I thumbed the switch. "Ignition."

There was a slight tremor, igniters firing slightly out of synch. Willy said, "I show 2 percent thrust."

I stole a look at the TV, ignoring Clanton's color commentary. There was white light guttering around the RL-10B expansion bells. "Looks like a good burn." Not the way you usually start up rocket engines, but we figured better safe than sorry.

Willy said, "Energize pumps. And watch the strain gauges." If we lost the Dragons and lived, we'd probably still get home someday, but I suppose he didn't want to lose Minnie.

There was a steady vibration now, and I felt my butt press down lightly on the canvas. "Pump idle, all six. Ten percent thrust."

I heard Willy blow out a long breath. "Okay. Go with throttle-up."

I'd gotten myself an old airliner throttle, though the computer and my software could handle all this, but, you know, I *wanted* to feel it. Feel it under my own hand. When I slid the bouquet of levers forward along the slot, I suddenly got heavier, then heavier still.

And when I looked out the cupola dome, the Earth's curved horizon was, ever so slowly, starting to drop, with a beautiful yellow crescent Moon rising out of the haze over Peru.

By the end of the work day, a few hours later, the Earth, shrunk to the apparent size of a basketball, had become a slim crescent due to our exit trajectory, and I floated in front of *Fafnir's* hatch window, picking out city lights with my binoculars. You would not believe how much light comes from Japan, not to mention the enormous coastal cities of China. All those people crammed into that little bit of space, then the black expanse of Siberia and Central Asia beyond.

It reminded me a little bit of making a night flight back from California to the east coast when I was a kid. You'd fly out of the solid light-flood of L.A., then it would be black, black, black all the way to the Mississippi, small towns along the river, then more black until you crossed the Appalachians, where the woods were lit up by dots of light, like a mirror held up to the midnight sky.

Behind me, Sarah said, "Can you still see the Delta stage?" I could hear the soft whisper of her getting undressed, getting ready for her first sponge-bath of the expedition.

I turned the binoculars toward where I thought it should be, then scanned along its trajectory, back and forth. It was just a little yellow thing, a bright rectangle far out in the black. "Barely."

She said, "Twenty clicks maybe? Tumbling?"

"I don't think so."

ULA had agreed to monitor the stage and direct it to an impact on the Lunar farside to keep it from becoming a future navigation hazard out in deep space. There's a Saturn S-IVB stage out there already that gets reported as a new asteroid every few years.

I took the binoculars down and looked out across the dark *Excelsior* as-

Magazines are the soul of science fiction, and the place where it first began. Hundreds of novels are published every year, but only a few magazines exist at any one time, and only a few of those last for any length of time. Asimov's is one of those that have lasted, becoming the literary heart of science fiction in the eighties, nineties, and beyond. Happy birthday, *Asimov's*! I'm grateful to have been a part of it all.

—William Barton

semblage, glad Willy and Minnie had turned out the cupola lights, but not gone into *Smaug* yet. If you looked close, you could see their shadows inside the little dome, close together, over by the pilot station.

We'd started rotisserie mode to keep skin heating more or less even, and just now, the sun was somewhere behind the Apex 400 body, leaving us in shadow. Just enough shadow to see a starry night sky, enough shadow to see the Milky Way go all the way round and, crossing it, a faint silver haze of *gegenschein*.

I whispered, "Damn . . ." All the millions of words I've churned out in my life and now, seeing this, I couldn't come up with a damn thing.

Sarah drifted up behind me, putting a hand on my shoulder to steady herself, then docking her head next to mine. "Wow!" she said. "Zodiacal light?"

I nodded, still speechless.

Softly, she said, "Alan, if you'd told me, when you sat down ten years ago to write that idiotic story . . . well. I'd've sent for the nice young men in their clean white coats."

I'd gotten the idea after looking at the websites of the six NASA Commercial Orbital Transportation System COTS contenders, had a good time writing it, and forgotten all about it while the usual year went by between sale and publication. A year, a couple of weeks, and then the phone rang.

I'd known Willy Gillooly for maybe twelve years by then, both of us busy with our lives and careers, acquaintances, maybe friends, because we both found time to write the occasional technostory, because both of us were good enough to get published. After telling me how much he liked the tale, he'd said, "I ran the numbers. Looks like you did the arithmetic right for a change."

I'd managed a dry, "Thanks." That was our usual litany. My shaky math, his shaky people.

Then he'd said, "How much you think it'd cost to really do it?"

"I dunno. A billion?"

Willy ran a research lab many orders of magnitude bigger than my little software design bureau, but nowhere near *that* big. "Too bad," he'd said. And that was that until, some months later, I found myself looking at the rules for submitting a proposal to the Gates Foundation. I'd called him back, then called the PayPal guy and let him know what I was thinking. Turned out he'd liked the story too.

The sun came around the Apex hull, lighting up the foreground, and Sarah said, "Hey, look! Willy and Minnie are necking!"

They were, floating under the cupola dome, faces pressed together, arms and legs wrapped around, holding them tightly together. "Still got their clothes on, anyway."

Sarah snickered, "If it was us . . . well, Willy's too shy for that."

"Who's he think's watching? God?"

"Us, dummy."

True. We'd had a damn good time on our orbital Second Honeymoon, and I suppose Willy and Minnie did too. Having a good time now, by the looks of it.

Sarah said, "Did you know Minnie's got a brother named Max?"

I turned away from the view and gave her a look. "Have they killed their parents yet?"

She laughed.

Two days later, we flew behind the Moon. I remember, when I was a kid, fresh out of high school, just shy of fifty years ago, listening to one of the Apollo 8 astronauts describe what it was like arriving in Lunar orbit. Because of when and where they were going, the limitations inherent in launching to the Moon from Florida, they'd arrived over the farside in darkness, the only sign of where they were a big black Something blotting out half the sky.

Our trajectory took us over a daylit farside, the four of us sitting in *Excelsior's* dome, looking out at a torn, hilly landscape, gray and brown dirt brilliantly floodlit yellow by the sun, gaping like hayseeds, bug-eyed in the big city. Though I'd been studying Lunar maps for years, anticipating this moment, I couldn't spot a God-damned thing.

I said, "Man. It's a good thing we don't need to find a landing site down there."

Willy said, "Yep. It'd be up to Sarah."

Who, sitting at her astrogation console, said, "Hey! I see the Soyuz!"

She put it on our screens, but it wasn't much to see, a tiny green freckle arcing over the moonscape, higher than we were, in a free-return trajectory. If you looked close, you could spot the solar panels, like wings on a blackfly.

Minnie said, "Can you get any closer?"

"That's the best I can do in the spotting scope."

Willy said, "Can you imagine being dumb enough to shell out all those bucks for that little ride?"

I shrugged. "Well, they've found four guys wanted to do it in the last three years." It was the ultimate space joyride to date. The Russians would send two tourists along with a pilot up to ISS for a weeklong stay, then dock the Soyuz to a propulsion module and fling them around the Moon. For a hundred million dollars a seat.

Willy said, "Maybe now we've proved the Interplanetary Dragon works, SpaceX will give it a try. You could do it with a 9S9 for half the money, with twice the seats."

Minnie said, "I think they'll wait to see how things turn out with the Moon Race."

I said, "And t\Space."

Sarah said, "And us."

"Yeah."

I guess there's a Moon Race, though not much of one in public. The Russians have only got their little tourist enterprise, claiming they were putting most of their effort and money into a long-range joint Mars program with ESA. Meanwhile, NASA's Orion capsule hadn't flown 'til 2014 after all, its ISS duties captured by SpaceX and RpK. All to the good, I guess, since now they were saying they'd be in Lunar orbit by late 2017, and would land the following year, two years ahead of dawdling Bush's original schedule.

Of course, the Chinese claimed they were going to put a little manned

lab in Lunar orbit early next year, and would land as soon as may be after that. Does that make it a race?

I imagine the governments know what the Transform Space Consortium, t\Space, is up to in the Australian desert, not far from the K-1 launch site, where US regulators chased them. I just don't imagine they think it'll work.

I'd visited t\Space once during the workup for *Excelsior* and been intrigued by their planetary lander design, but had been just as skeptical of the notion you could do it without a big cargo launcher. Just the idea of staging tankers along the whole route, refueling on the way to the Moon, again in Lunar orbit before landing, then again afterward . . . not to mention flying back from the Moon in a spaceship with no aerobraking capability.

You know that old story too: either you incinerate in the Earth's atmosphere, or you fly on by and die some time later, out in the cold and dark.

The t\Space guy giving us the tour had looked me in the eye, and said, "If you don't break the Outer Space Treaty, we will." Made me think about the little Standard ARM flag we'd had made up. That'll be fun.

There was a little beep-beep from the console, and Sarah said, "Coming up on phasing burn. Five minutes."

We were using the Moon mainly to twist our orbital inclination relative to the Sun, so one little burn and, UB(2009)/21 here we come . . . Damn, I thought. I must be getting used to this. . . .

By the time another twenty-four hours had passed, Earth was a tiny blue marble in the sky, yellow-gray Moon a similar size off to one side. When I'd mentioned to Willy how the Moon seemed to be getting smaller faster, he'd given me a little smirk: It's *closer*, dummy. *Think!*

Oh, right.

So the sun was bright and the sky was black, and there wasn't much more to see. The brighter stars were managing to poke through the sun's glare, but most were lost in nothingness, here and there the steady, bright fireflies of the big planets and close planets. Venus over there, Jupiter there, wan Saturn that way . . . I looked for Mars but couldn't find it. Maybe . . .

Sarah was at the comm console, tracking the high-gain antenna this way and that, trying to find the CNN satellite again, muttering something about the published ephemerides, so I sat down at the astrogation station, pulled up the scope image, and started slewing along the ecliptic. There. Venus looked like a brilliant crescent moon, blinding against an intensely black backdrop.

Funny you can't see . . . well, no, I guess not. No Earthlight to make the night side visible on the edge of vision. No moon. No nothing.

Sarah said, "Hey. We're on!" When I looked, Willy and Minnie were floating behind her chair, each holding on with one hand.

On the TV, there was another dark sky, indistinct, T-shaped thingy centered on the screen, while a woman's vibrant voice said, "This is a view of *Excelsior* emerging from behind the Moon, taken from telescopes at Mauna Kea, Hawaii. The spaceship and its four-person crew are now on their way to near-earth asteroid UB(2009)/21, the first human beings to leave

Earth's orbit for a destination beyond the Moon. This is Chelsea Clanton, reporting live from Houston!"

Willy said, "Houston?"

Sarah said, "I think she's at SpaceHab."

"But that's just our Apex 400 engineering telemetry!"

A shrug. "We didn't exactly set up a Mission Control."

The TV switched to CNN anchor Barney Frank in Atlanta, who said, "Meanwhile, in other news . . ." His sweaty jowls were replaced by the hazy ruins of Damascus.

I slewed on from Venus, sticking to the ecliptic, unable to remember what planet was next. Suddenly, Saturn was a pale pastel disk, rings steeply tilted down, like the brim of a rakishly worn hat. Imagine going there. Maybe, if I live long e . . .

Christ. I never thought I'd live long enough, or get lucky enough, to be *here*! Count your damned blessings and be glad, Burke the Jerk . . .

Still. As always. Hoping against hope.

A little more than a year after we secured that Gates Grant, Willy and I were still trying to get our designs resolved, figure out what the best way to do *It* would be, disagreeing every step of the way. One day, we took a Wild Blue flight to the new AndrewsSpace facility in the Nevada desert. I remember it was hot as hell that day, desert wind reeking like gunpowder, but it was nice and cool, cool and dim in the unexpectedly big hangar the pretty Chinese woman was showing us.

Willy thought I was nuts of course, wasting our time like this. I mean, Andrews had been one of the COTS losers, though they'd fielded the biggest of the CEV proposals back in 2006, a ten-man Apollo-style capsule. Still, they had a lot of government contracts and were the primary subcontractor on the K-1. They had *something*. Something to show us.

When Willy saw what it was, he tripped over his own feet, staggering, almost falling down.

I managed a little more *savoir faire*, stopping dead in my tracks, gasping, saying, "Well . . . *Fuck!*"

The Chinese girl burst out in a full-throated laugh, startling in such a skinny little thing.

The object lying on its side in the big, cool hangar was another matter entirely. I'd call it every goofy SF dork's wet dream of a magic starship. Big as an airliner, maybe fifty meters, nose to tail, eight huge triangular metal vanes starting amidships and tapering toward the tail, ring of windows just behind the conical nose.

I said, "Where are you going with this? Tau Ceti?"

That got another big laugh.

"This is the Mini-Mag Orion, isn't it?"

She said, "That's right. We don't call it that anymore, though. Not since NASA took the name Orion for the CEV."

The original Orion had been a pulsed-fusion spaceship, sort of an interplanetary battleship, designed in the late 1950s. It would've worked, though the idea of riding full-sized H-bombs into the sky seemed . . . lunatic, at best. This one, I knew, proposed to use a z-axis magnetic pinch engine design. But . . . really *building* it?

"So what do you call it now?"

"The Project 8K11 Full-Scale Mockup."

"Mockup."

"It'll be about five years before we build the battleship prototype."

A battleship prototype is a working version of a design, built with no regard to weight requirements. Too heavy to fly, but you could run all the systems and see them work.

Willy said, "How much?"

Another big laugh. "You boys must have some real money!"

I said, "Our annual budget is . . ."

Willy snapped, "Alan!"

Oh, right. To some people, a hundred million a year is big bucks. Not to this girl, though.

She smiled. "We think we're ten, maybe twelve years from space trials. When we sell them. . . ? At least three billion USD twenty-ten. Adjusted for inflation, of course."

"Of course. Can we see inside?"

The control room in the nose was pretty good. Spacious and bright, with three seats in front of instrument panels, the other seven flat racks on the rear bulkhead, for passengers. I said, "It looks like your old CEV design."

"It is. Still has the heat shield, too."

Willy said, "This thing can't land on a planet. Why . . ."

She said, "Just in case. It has minimal RCS, fuel cells and life support sufficient for one month. Call it an escape capsule."

I said, "Or a lifeboat."

"That too."

The cylindrical compartment behind the command module looked pretty much like the bottom deck of Skylab, with a head and galley, storage compartments, and a bunch of "zero-gee staterooms," really not much more than closets. Two hatches led one level further aft, one to an airlock, the other to what she called "accessible life support."

"You going to launch manned?"

She nodded. "It's sized to take the place of an Ares V earth-departure stage. We plan to launch in a high arc from Canaveral, and use the fusion drive to make orbit." You could see the faraway gleam in her eyes then, a fanatic pursuing a fantastic dream. "With a full fuel load, she can make a round trip anywhere in the inner solar system except Mercury. We can get to Mars, Venus. The low-inclination asteroids. Even Callisto, though not the other Galileans."

Willy whispered, "Callisto . . ." looking right at me.

"Too much radiation anyway," she said.

Later, outside in the roasting gunpowder night, she said, "So where do you boys think you're headed?"

Maybe she meant just tonight, and Willy said, "Vegas . . ."

But I pointed at a yellow diamond high in the night sky. "You see Jupiter?"

Willy hissed, "Alan . . ."

I ignored him, and slid my finger forward to a point sixty degrees along the ecliptic. "Right about there, I think."

Her dropped jaw had a satisfyingly comical look. After a minute, face

quite serious, she said, "If you can come up with enough dough, we might be able to cut you a deal on an early flight model."

I said, "By 2020, maybe?"

"Probably a couple of years after that, I'm afraid."

"Okay. We'll be in touch."

Sitting in the cool comfort of our Hybrid Grand Cherokee, Willy said, "Why'd you tell her?"

I shrugged. "No one's going to race us to the Fore-Trojans. You know that. And we've got easier fish to catch first."

He nodded. "We'll sure as hell have to *catch* those fish, if we want to scrape up that kind of cash!"

"Yeah. Meanwhile, we've got a flight to catch." I tapped the dashboard clock. "Our meeting with Musk and his team is in ten hours."

In the here and now, as Earth and Moon shrank slowly away, I finally managed to find Mars, a mottled red ball in the scope. You couldn't see much real terrain, just the ice caps and the four dark blotches of Olympus Mons and Tharsis ridge, but it *did* look like it had canals.

So many illusions. So little time.

Maybe I will stand there one time before I die.

Who knows?

A month later, I sat watching my instruments, as Willy burped *Excelsior's* methane/LOX engine, matching orbits with UB(2009)/21. Though you could hear the pop of the RCS thrusters, the main engine was too smooth and too far away, the only sign of anything unusual happening the little surges of acceleration on my butt.

From the astrogation console, Sarah called out. "That's it! Ten clicks."

When I looked up, having finished my checklist, Willy was yawing us around toward the asteroid. The sky was full of stars, of course, and for a moment I was disoriented. Okay. There's the perpetual noonday sun over there, same size as seen from Earth and the Moon, not blinding only because of the photoreactive glass forming the base of the dome's UV-opaque quartz outer layer. "Mmmmmphhhh . . ."

Sarah, familiar with all my little grunts, said, "Look just over *Smaug's* high-gain antenna."

Earth was tiny and blue from eight million miles out, but still a visible disk, Moon a gray-brown speck off to one side. Suddenly, the sky was familiar, Orion's belt jumping out at me, then the Pleiades, Aldebaran, and the Hyades . . . There. That fat, pale-orange spark is Jupiter, and . . .

I glanced at my own instruments, then tipped my head back so I could look straight up through the dome. "Hmh. I expected to *see* it."

Willy said, "I did too. I guess, from almost five miles out, a rock smaller than a football stadium . . ."

Minnie released her harness and floated up toward the inner surface of the dome. "It's big enough to see, big as your thumbnail, anyway. I guess the albedo is too low."

Sarah said, "Hiding in the dark between the stars."

I felt a sudden, hard pulse of atavistic thrill at her words. *Look! Look* where you are!

I'd felt it a few times before, always unexpected, though you'd think by now I'd know the moments when it would come. Once when I sat in those sunny offices in Santa Barbara, California, sitting across the table from the famous PayPal guy, signing my name below Willy's on a contract said we agreed to buy three Falcon 9S9 rockets, complete with launch services, from Space Exploration Technologies, along with two complete manned-version Dragon space capsules, customized to our specs.

Again four years later, as the four of us lay on our backs along with one other "honeymooning couple," as I felt the hard, complex jolt as those nine Merlin engines lit, and the ground outside the porthole started to drop, taking us on our "practice flight" to the Bigelow Exodus.

A third time on the day we took delivery of *Excelsior* from SpaceHab, standing in a hangar just before they boxed it up for shipment to Kwajalein. I'd stood there, looking in through the dome at those four seats and instrument panels, and suddenly realized what I was going to do, where I was going to go.

In the spotter scope image, UB(2009)/21 was just off the center cross-hatch, wanly lit up by the sun, not quite a potato-shaped lump. No, here was a fat charcoal-gray belly, with a smaller lobe on one end, making something that looked like a dirty snowman wearing a funeral shawl. A crippled snowman, perhaps?

I said, "Snow-hunchback," not quite realizing I'd spoken.

Minnie giggled and said, "That's a pretty image! Too bad there's already an asteroid named Victor Hugo ..."

I said, "Is there one named Quasimodo?"

She kicked off from the dome and came to float behind me, holding onto the back of my seat. Then, in a dreaming sort of voice, she said, "All sorts of clues to the formation of this thing. Five, maybe six distinct terrains. Craters all over the smaller binary, but near the contact point, you see they fade away ..."

This was her pulse of joy, different from mine perhaps, but still the moment of a lifetime. I suddenly realized Minnie Gillooly was about to become only the second geologist to stand on the surface of another world, after Harrison Schmitt on the Moon, forty-four long years ago. What the hell *took* so long?

Damn fools in high places, of course.

Willy said, "I guess it's time to prepare for landing. Guys?"

Sarah said, "We can still decide to bring *Excelsior* in close."

I shook my head. "Probably a good idea to stick with our plan, and leave *Excelsior* out here where nothing can happen to it." It'd be a cramped ride home in *Smaug* and *Fafnir*, if we lost our mother ship.

Willy said, "Okay. Let's get to it."

Another little thrill went up my spine.

No more than an hour later, and I sat strapped in *Fafnir*'s pilot seat, looking out through the left forward docking window at *Excelsior*'s dimly lit cupola dome. Sarah had the MacDonald-Detweiler MiniCanadarm unshipped from its mount on the little SpaceHab airlock/adaptor, and had reached forward to grapple its standard end effector to the fixture on *Excelsior*.

It's become the usual way spacecraft link up now. No more gentle forward movement, "parking in the garage," and gentle shudder of soft dock. Just fly within range of an RMS, or use your own, and swing on in to a Standard Berthing Mechanism.

Beyond *Excelsior*, I could see the windows of *Smaug* lit up yellow, could see the vague shapes and shadows of Willy and Minnie, doing their tasks, same as us. In my earphones, Willy's voice, slightly crackly with interplanetary static, said, "Ready, gang?"

My mouth went dry, and I could feel my heart start to stutter. "All set." "Let's do it."

I took a deep breath and looked at Sarah, a few feet away in the flight engineer's seat.

She smiled, and said, "Okay, Alan. Just like in the simulator."

"I prefer to think of it as just like in a story, sweetling."

More smile, then she looked down at her instruments, one hand in the RMS glove. "Say when."

I remember the day I sat down to write that story. I'd never been much of a writer, but I'd kept it up over a long, long time, thirty-some-odd years producing a couple of dozen stories, a handful of novels, most of them published, in magazines, by New York publishers. Just a hobby, something fun to do when I wasn't making money, first as a marine machinery mechanic, then, when I got too old to be comfortable working outdoors on the coast of Maine, in the winter, at night, sitting in an office writing computer software.

I remember I sat down in my old green secretarial chair, in front of the aging HP 4550Z I set aside for writing, opened up a new file in WordStar 7.0a for DOS, the antiquated word processor I used only for stories. Wiggled my fingers above the keyboard to make the juices flow, then tappy-tap-tap, the words began forming on the screen.

The people in the story weren't afraid, didn't feel their hearts speed up like crazy, lived in the future, had seen it all, were used to it all, ho-hum.

Then I thought, What if it was me? *Really* me? What if I had the money to buy a space capsule from one of the New Space Entrepreneurs I was reading about, and go on my own *real* space adventure? How would I feel then?

So I wrote the story that way.

I was a hell of a lot more nervous now than the me in the story had been. But I said, "When."

Sarah punched commands into her console, fingers chattering rapidly across the keyboard, and I felt a series of light jolts as the berthing latches let go, then a quiver as we came loose from *Excelsior*. "Berthing mechanism released," she said.

Then she put her arm in the glove, pushed the arm with one long smooth motion, then quickly opened her fingers. Out the window, I could see *Excelsior* suddenly swing away, then recede as the RMS end effector let go of the grapple fixture. And Sarah said, "Grapple released."

I watched *Excelsior* drift away as she swung the arm back in and clipped it to its rack on the adaptor. Beyond the mothership, I could see *Smaug* receding in the opposite direction, growing smaller, then smaller still. Lit-

tle lights twinkled around the hull, and she stopped, hanging in space.

Okay, Burke the Jerk. Get busy. I nudged the hand controller, RCS jets popping and muttering through the hull, and *Excelsior* stopped going away too.

In my earphones, Willy's voice crackled, "Okay. I guess if it wanders off while we're gone, we've got plenty of fuel to go looking."

I took my eyes off the window, and looked down at the three flat panels of my IFR display, looking at radar, visual camera, and FLIR, columns of data down the left-hand edge of each screen, just the way I liked. Radar was all soft static, but for the bright beads of *Excelsior* and *Smaug* in the foreground. Visual showed nothing. But in FLIR, UB(2009)/21 was a bright sparkle, waiting against the dark sky.

I whispered, "Tally-ho . . ."

Willy said, "Time to go, boys and girls."

I wiped the sweat from my palms on the front of my coverall, then took hold of the rotational controller on the right, throttle on the left, twist, then gentle push . . .

Fafnir swung around her y-axis, there was a gentle thud-hiss as the main engine lit, and we were on our way.

At a relative velocity of only one meter per second, it took us almost three hours to cross the ten kilometer gap between *Excelsior* and the asteroid. Always the nap girl, Sarah tucked her hands into her safety harness, and was soon asleep, gentle buzz of a girlish snore soft and serene.

Lucky, I thought.

But I wouldn't, or couldn't.

I sat in my seat, hands on the armrests, staring out at a fantastically starry night, watching UB(2009)/21 materialize out of the mist. Every once in a while, I'd glance to port, where I could see the windows and running lights of *Smaug* twinkling fifty meters away.

I bet Willy's heart isn't pounding.

Willy has a hard edge to him, volatile as me, yes, but somehow far away, self contained. Probably why we'd been able to stay friends all these years, when so many other people were mad at us both, over what seemed like nothing.

Burke the Jerk I'd been as a kid, jackass now to all those people I'd beaten in business deals, contracts I'd won when theirs were lost. Jealous? Or just me?

You could see our little asteroid now, lit up dim gray by the sun, a deformed peanut hanging against the black, slowly growing bigger, beginning to occlude stars now. I wondered again if Quasimodo was already taken. What the hell does that name mean? I'd taken Latin in school when I was a kid, much of it long forgotten, gone along with the French and Japanese I'd learned later. I remembered *quasi* meant "as if" and *modo* was used the way we use only, merely, just . . . So what the hell did Hugo mean? "Just as if?" Just as if what?

Probably, somewhere, there are learned articles about it, but I was never a learned man.

The asteroid was looking big now, subtending quite a bit of sky anyway,

and when Sarah's console beeped, she woke up all at once, like magic, like she'd never been asleep at all, blue eyes out the window, voice whispering, "Wow...!"

Growing large in the deep distance, it wasn't so odd looking after all. From this perspective, coming in perpendicular to its axis of rotation, sun more or less behind us . . .

Over my earphones, Minnie's voice, high, squeaky and full of tension, said, "Here comes the B segment of the contact binary. Looks like . . ."

And there it was, peering over the limb, a new bulge, quite a bit darker than what was in the foreground, changing perspectives as we approached, asteroid elongating into something not quite like an egg shape, defying common sense somehow. Details without number seemed to proliferate across the surface in a maze of shifting shadow, while Minnie chattered about bright ray systems and a carbon regolith.

Willy suddenly burst out, "Hey, that's really *something*, huh?" Excited now, voice thick with some unknown emotion, showing he wasn't quite the cartoon character I sometimes imagined.

Minnie said, "I've got a fix on the density. Figuring it as if it were rough spheres of one-eighty and one-thirty meters, it comes in at around 1.03 grams per cubic centimeter. Pretty light."

From her place beside me, Sarah, whose world was mainly abstract numbers, said, "That's a good sign, isn't it?"

Not wanting Willy or Minnie to jump on me with a flood of corrective detail, I whispered, "If it's almost half carbon compounds, I guess so . . ."

From the story. Straight from the goddam story!

In my earphones, Willy said, "I heard that!"

And, "Close enough," came from Minnie.

Close enough. I don't know if either one of them ever really believed in my story, which had been set in the Fore Trojan asteroids, but this . . . *This!* Real.

I had to readjust my idea of the thing's size continually. I'd thought of it as small, just a little bitty hill in space, but it was damned big, seen from close up, irregularities and empty outer space background screwing up my sense of scale. UB(2009)/21 continued to grow, filling the window with hundreds, then thousands of distinct features, cratered like the surface of the Moon. The true nature of the contact binary was apparent now, the slightly smaller secondary body come well out of eclipse, recreating that twisted snowman shape, Quasimodo the Snow Hunchback.

Minnie said, "I see at least five distinct terrains here . . ."

The asteroid was turning to "ground" now, seeming to slant away because we were going to pass just to one side of the large, grayish component.

Sarah said, "Time on target."

I put my hands back on my controls, yawing *Fafnir* around to point the main engine toward our travel vector. I said, "Ready, Willy?"

He said, "Ready and . . . three, two, one . . ."

I pulsed the main engine and suddenly we were hanging over a brief little world of dark gray stone. Motionless . . . no, not quite. I could see the ground moving off to one side.

"Willy, I . . ."

Sarah said, "Radial velocity there, not us."

Right. I forgot. *E pur si muove* as far as the eye can see.

Willy said, "Are we seeing gravitational acceleration?"

"I almost can't tell. Right on the edge of the Doppler radar's sensitivity, I guess."

I said, "Good enough, anyway."

Willy said, "Hey, remember when people used to say, 'Good enough for government work?'"

"Yup. Probably why government work done by private contractors always sucked."

Sarah said, "Guys? Not now."

Right. Dumb. "So. Where should we land?" Since there was no way to get a telescopic view of something so small and far away, we'd never had any planning maps for UB(2009)/21. Now . . .

Minnie said, "It's so strange. The albedo ranges are similar to some of the asteroids that've been investigated in main-belt Piazzi bodies. Aside from the steep upturn in the reflectance spectra above point-seven micrometers, it might as well be some old carbonaceous chondrite."

"We'll just have to go down and see," said Willy. "How about we pick a point near the intermediate zone on A? We can take a look at those grooves. Maybe they're the remains of that internal activity Alan had in his story!"

I felt an odd creepy feeling come and go. Willy believed in my story that much?

Sarah surprised me by saying, "More likely just a manifestation of broken rock from the collision that made this thing."

I said, "What the hell. We have to start someplace."

It took us about an hour to get down, accelerating into a slow arc along the gray lobe, stopping over what was technically the south pole, as defined by rotational direction, then accelerating toward the ground while Sarah unshipped the MiniCanadarm and pulled the radio-controlled dexterous manipulator system from its mount on the airlock hull.

We'd talked about mounting landing legs on the Dragons, but it was expensive, and pretty much pointless, given the almost nonexistent gravity we were facing here. Christ, we won't even be able to *walk* on the surface! We'll need the compressed air maneuvering units we bought just to keep from drifting away.

Like the cosmonauts in my novel *Fellow Traveler*, Willy'd said when I brought it up a few years ago.

Yep. Like that.

Down we went, *Smaug* and *Fafnir* side by side, MiniCanadarms, each with a big hand now, splayed out in front, slowly, slowly, ever so slowly . . . I tried to hold my breath while the ground reached up and grew more or less flat in front of us, but I kept running out of air, exhaling, inhaling again noisily.

Just before contact, Willy snickered and said, "Jeez, Alan! Don't have a heart attack on me!"

The hand and arm flexed, cushioning our impact, which I could hardly feel at all, no more than a faint surge against my harness. I took a look at

the accelerometers and popped a couple of RCS jets very gently, while Sarah grabbed with the dexterous manipulator, digging into regolith. Maybe there was a bit of a bob, a tiny little sway, then . . .

Sarah said, "That's it. *Fafnir* has landed."

I heard Minnie say, "*Smaug*, too!"

I said, "Where away?"

"About fifty meters to your . . . ummm . . . west?"

"Fifty meters? That's pretty close. Uh . . . oh, wait. That puts you over the local horizon, doesn't it?"

Willy said, "You know, I keep forgetting how little this place is!" I could swear he sounded dazed. There was a rustling in the earphones, then he said, "I'm up at the hatch window. I can see your main engine and a bit of propulsion module sticking up."

I said, "Okay, I guess it's time to . . ." I choked suddenly, unable to speak.

Sarah said, "Time to suit up and go outside."

Willy yelled something that sounded like, "Yee-hah!"

I'd like to say I stepped out of the airlock hatch ten minutes later, stepped out and planted my spacesuit boots firmly in the charcoal dust, first man on Quasimodo, but what I really did was float out and hang suspended. I guess if I'd waited long enough, I'd've drifted on down, but what I did was puff the compressed air jets on my backpack, once to get started down, and again to keep from bouncing off.

Then I just stood there, silent, trying not to move a muscle, not wanting to fly away into the sky on the strength of a twitch. We'd talked about Neal-Armstrongish first words and decided against them. First on the Moon is a big damn deal. First on a little bitty rock, lost in the void between the worlds . . . I dunno. Anyway, we'd decided against it.

Time for words later, when and if we decided we really would do the flag ceremony, planting the corporate banner of Standard ARM in the black dirt of UB(2009)/21 and staking our first mining claim.

We'd landed near the rotational pole, technically on the A lobe, so the immediate vicinity seemed level, a golden-black plain, featureless except for a random spray of little craters. In one direction, there was a nearly normal-looking moonscape, in the other, a strange, stretched-out depression, constricted in the middle, almost like a valley, but it kept going downhill, all the way to the horizon.

There's something funny about . . .

I had a sudden vivid memory of a long-gone day, back in 1985, not long after I quit the shipyard and was just getting started on my new career as a computer programmer. I'd gone to visit my high school friend Matt, who lived in a decaying old mansion his wife had inherited, sitting beside a lake outside a place called Shickshinny, Pennsylvania, somewhere near Wilkes-Barre.

We'd gone for a walk that day, talking about old times, about his new wife, about the pretty blonde I'd recently lost to another man, about the books and stories and magazine articles I was writing, about his similar aspirations, so far unrealized, when suddenly I'd come to a stop, sniffing against my allergies, looking around.

He'd given me a strange glance, then looked around too. Damn! he'd said, You can't see anything but the hillside and sky! Like we're on a little bitty world, somewhere out in space.

This was like that now. It didn't *really* feel like the horizon was too close, or was right at our feet, the way it was portrayed in pre-Space Age science fiction stories. No, the ground just went out in a normal sort of way, and then ended against sky, like there was some kind of cliff.

I tried to take a step forward, tipped to one side, and drifted off the ground. When I righted myself with the backpack, the ground had shifted under me, and the "cliff edge" had moved on, exposing new level ground. It really was the horizon. And it really was close.

Sarah, floating outside the ship now, drifting toward me, looked disconcerted behind her faceplate. "Hmm. Strange," was all she said.

The four of us made rendezvous between the ships, in the confusing terrain where A and B overlapped into each other. It reminded me a little bit of the mess on Enceladus, black overlaying dark gray, rather than white, but you could see the gray was the real "bedrock" here.

Once we'd gotten away from the immediate area of the spacecraft, going further into the tarry black surface associated with B, Minnie and Willy moved closer together, and began hooking up cables. Although it was originally intended to be carried in the field by one hopefully young and fit geologist, with the instrument package on his back, display package on his chest, holding the five-foot sensor boom in his hands, the GE GeoStrider wasn't really suited to our spacesuits, or zero gee.

Since our Russian-made suits had life support backpacks, with used ISS maneuvering units clipped behind them, we'd split it up three ways. Willy had the instruments on his chest, Minnie the displays, I'd operate the boom, and Sarah would ride herd on the cables.

"Okay," said Willy. "Snakes it is."

I said, "Snakes'd be trying to get away. These bastards seem to *like* us!"

Sarah said, "Are you *sure* nobody else can hear us over the radio?"

I thought of reminding her we were recording everything, both voice and through our little helmet cams, but kept my mouth shut. "Any place in particular you want me to start?"

Minnie said, "Here is good." I lowered the boom and started to flip the head, but Minnie said, "Don't bother with the brush or rat yet," so I lowered the sensor face to the ground and thumbed the switch.

Minnie said, "Um."

There was a bit of silence, then Willy said, "So? Anything?"

"Weellll . . . It's what we expected. This surface is composed of kerogen-like organics. Processed CHON grains, maybe. A little methane and ammonia mixed in by meteoritic gardening, processed by larger impacts and solar flux . . ."

I said, "This stuff comes off B, right? And B is some kind of processed cometary nucleus. A lot of the stuff that gets knocked off B has to wind up on A if it isn't sent off into space. Maybe we should move up toward the top of the head?"

Willy said, "Tomorrow or the day after? We've got plenty of time. Min?"

She said, "Sure. Let's focus on the interface zone for now."

We moved off downslope in a bunch, following her lead. Oddly, though my eyes were telling me we were going down, some subtler clue, maybe from the tiny bit of gravity tickling my vestibular organs, seemed to say I was ascending a very shallow hill. A strange hill at that. My eyes kept wanting to see the valley as a bulbous black mountain, hanging over me like a mushroom cloud.

Just one little shift of perspective, and we're flies climbing a vertical wall. Hmh. Scary? No. Flies can fly and so can we.

After about twenty minutes, taking readings here and there, sometimes using the brush and rat heads on the sampler, we stopped at the terminus of a long groove, looking down into a bare and shallow depression, half filled with shadow, dark and darker. The groove dwindled quickly in the distance, climbing up onto the gray hump of B.

Willy said, "Looks like a textbook graben, buried and softened by deep regolith."

Minnie whispered something to herself, then said, "No signs of layering or endogenic activity. Probably just big cracks, I'm afraid."

I said, "Crush two hard-boiled eggs together at their blunt ends and this is what you might get. Hard to say what it means for the interior." And ever since we'd seen the reflectance spectra for UB(2009)/21, years ago now, the interior is what we'd talked about. And why the M in Standard ARM stood for Mining.

"Why," asked Sarah, "do the cracks line up with both bodies?"

After a second, Minnie, voice thin and dreamlike said, "You know, that's a damn good question. . . ."

The next day, we went out with the collapsible drill rig we'd brought. It'd begun life as a quarter-scale prototype of the rig being made for Project Constellation, and the company that made it had been quite reluctant to sell it to us, having been instructed to sell it for scrap by NASA. When we found out they were planning to sell the first *full-scale* test rig to t\Space, which planned to file *claim* to pieces of the Moon, we talked them into selling the prototype to us as a species of hush money. Willy and I were both good with machinery, so it didn't take much customizing to make it do what we wanted.

In between putting the damned thing together and working over all the samples and sensor data we had, we even had time for our scheduled interview with CNN. I thought it was supposed to be taped, given there was a round trip signal delay of more than a minute, but Ms. Clanton said they were going out live.

Gives them more time for color commentary, I guess. Anyway, she told us our little trip was causing quite a flap down there, with the Japanese media calling us "space pirates," French and Russian diplomats raising treaty issues in the UN General Assembly, and the U.S. government ominously silent.

Didn't seem much interested in what we thought of the asteroid though. Just, show the tape of the EVA between blips of commentary, views of us floating in *Excelsior's* cupola. I heard later, the approach film we shot of

UB(2009)/21 got shown over and over again on every news show in the world, and I even managed to slip in a reference to Quasimodo.

When we popped the hatch on *Fafnir*, struggling with all our junk, it was nighttime, Quasimodo's surface a blending of gray and black shadows, low hummocky rises here and there, details hardly visible. Overhead, the stars were like tiny needles of light.

I said, "Smauggies?"

Minnie's voice was a bit staticky, punched through the asteroid's surface layer. "Loud and clear."

"Starting westward along the bary-equator now, toward your anticipated position."

"Roger. See you there."

I still felt a little funny, using old-timey radio jargon. Roger. Over and out. Ten-four . . . A coordinated puff of compressed air and we began drifting away from the ship, surface just beneath our toes, moving slowly over a world of silvery dusk, and Sarah said, "You know, despite what I know it is, it really seems like we're on a mountaintop here."

Sudden change of perspective. Right. World curving away in all directions, stars outlining the horizon. We'll walk to the edge and suddenly the black plains will spread out below, maybe the twinkling of city lights on the horizon, far far away . . . Instead, on the edge of our little world, came first the milky ghost of the solar corona, then sunrise, preceded by a few tongues of blinding prominence flame.

The landscape expanded all around us, the two worlds, A and B, growing together, shadows shortening, as the neck valley of the our crippled snowman came out of eclipse.

We made rendezvous with Willy and Minnie a little farther on than we expected. They were "standing" on a bit of underhang, just on the edge of the neck of striated rubble that formed the last bit of the bridge onto A, festooned with as much hardware as we had, floating together, looking down at something.

I heard Willy say, "So what the hell is *this*?"

Beyond them, amid the jumble of small craters and humps, there was a sudden change of color, a sinuous ridge of rusty brown material, like a snake under the regolith, spattered here and there with patches of black obviously blasted from nearby craters.

Minnie whispered, "Um. That's odd."

"No kidding."

I said, "So what is it?"

Minnie said, "Don't know." She started working on the fasteners holding her parts of the core sampler to her harness, the rest of us following suit because she was pretty much calling the shots when it came to this stuff. "It almost looks like something that's bubbled out of the interior."

"On a body this small?"

In a small voice, she said, "You wouldn't think so . . ." I could see her head moving behind the helmet's faceplate, as if looking around. "But the orientation of those linear features . . ."

It took almost two hours to set up the little drill rig, while the sun and stars went round and round. The biggest problem was driving the pitons

to hold it down. We had an inertialess hammer, but it didn't work at all well, twirling out of my grip when I triggered it, banging out to the end of its lanyard.

Willy and Sarah finally held me down with continuous firing of their backpacks, Minnie steadying the rig while I swung our high-tech gizmo like something from a hardware store.

Finally, we were ready, and I got behind Minnie, holding her more or less steady, one hand on her life-support system mounting rack, the other on my maneuvering unit controller. In theory, I would be able to feel her shifting movements and puff my jets appropriately, keeping her more or less where she needed to be.

I said, "Okay?"

"That's fine, uh . . . one moment . . ."

I could feel the core drill's vibration, propagating through Minnie's suit and into mine, while I wiggled the little thumb controller, trying to compensate. I said, "Minnie, are you . . ."

"!?" She made an odd, wordless grunt.

Shove.

I felt myself going over backward, feet swinging up to the sky as Minnie's LSS rack popped out of my hand, pulling away as if propelled by a runaway thruster.

Me: Dark ground whizzing by. Black sky. Dark ground, a little further away. Black sky . . .

"Jesus Christ!" Willy's voice was almost a scream.

I heard Minnie shout, "I can't see! Where the hell *am* I?"

I watched the ground go by, then started toggling the controller this way and that, working against the spin, until I stabilized, facing away from the sample site, able to judge and kill what little bit of lateral movement I'd picked up.

My heart was thundering like mad, lungs pumping, but . . . good, good. Didn't panic. Very good. I caught my breath, and looked around.

Minnie was up in the sky, maybe twenty meters off the surface, turning about her center of gravity, a spinning starfish, growing smaller as I watched. Her suit was somehow disfigured, almost as if misshapen, some kind of black splash on it, blending some of her edges against the sky, as if bites had been taken out by some space monster.

And . . . ?

A column of bubbling liquid, jetting, curling around itself, climbing off the surface of B, carrying the remains of our little drill rig with it.

For just a moment, I couldn't really make myself see it for what it was. No. Nothing like that. Not *here*. I must be misunderstanding what I see. Familiar expectations, as if this were a world of *air* and . . .

Minnie's voice said, "Where am I . . . ?"

Sarah said, "You're about sixty meters up. Can you . . . ?"

"I can't see anything. There's something all over my faceplate."

From not far away, I saw Willy rising off the surface, jetting in her direction. He said, "I'm coming after you. Hang on. Relax." You could hear something like pride in his voice then. Proud of you, Minnie. Proud of myself.

We're not *really* heroes of the Space Age, bold astronauts with that fa-

bled Right Stuff. Just a bunch of geezers with . . . damn. The right stuff after all.

Sarah said, "Should we . . ."

I said, "We need to stay here. If he can't catch up to her, or they can't get back, we'll need to go after them in *Fafnir*."

"They're pretty far off, already. I guess the rendezvous radar . . ."

I turned and looked back toward the brown column. It'd pinched off at its base and goo was slowly curling toward the surface, curling over the area we'd been sampling. The rest of it kept on climbing, hard to see against the dark sky, an independent body rising from the surface, losing its shape as it rose, as if some surface tension were . . .

Well. A liquid body. *Here?*

As I watched, it passed low over A's limb and receded toward the stars. Going. Going. Gone.

It took us quite a while to make it back to *Excelsior*. Willy managed to retrieve Minnie, catching up to her, stopping her spin like an old EVA pro, though he was no Ox van Hoften for size, getting them both on their way back to the surface on a direct trajectory for *Smaug*'s landing site.

Once it was clear they were going to make it back, I'd said, "Okay. We'll head for *Fafnir*." I moved over to the fresh curl of brown solid on the surface, looking at odd, lumpy shapes glistening in the sun, like fresh roofing tar in a bucket. "Want me to try for another sample before we go back? Maybe we can hack off . . ."

Willy laughed, right on the edge of a hysterical giggle. "I think we have enough. Wait'll you see Minnie's suit!"

All the way back to the mother ship, Willy complained about the stink in *Smaug*. Though they sealed it in the airlock as soon as they could, the "sample" was outgassing, making their eyes burn and noses run. Sniffing away, and despite Willy's loud objections, Minnie'd run the geo-sensor against it and taken some readings before slamming the hatch.

Then we heard her voice, squeaky with amazement: "Hydrocarbon contaminants! Maybe we can become CHON miners after all . . ."

Willy, voice dry and amused now that he'd calmed down, now that the ship's filters were cleaning out the CM's air, said, "Well, there's our damn article, Alan. Hell, we oughta clear a couple of thousand bucks on that, easy!"

He'd ridden me about the unlikelihood of our little adventure paying off, whenever our funding sources couldn't hear.

Minnie said, "Huh. Mostly constructs of methane and ethane. And, uh . . . some kind of propylated compound."

Sarah said, "How dangerous is this? The suit's still outgassing in your airlock, so how're you going to get back aboard. . . ?"

I said, "They can cycle the airlock once, then rush through, grabbing a sample on the way. The faceplate will come off easiest."

A couple of hours later, we met them in the docking segment below *Excelsior*'s cupola, floating above the closed hatch that led down to the habitat we'd built in the Apex 400's cargo bay.

Sarah, said, "Wow! That really stinks! I hate to open up the hab and . . ."

Willy held up the suit faceplate he'd detached. "Outgassing's about over. We need to get this down to the lab ASAP."

As I cranked the hatch's lock lever, I thought about the familiarity of the odd, ethery smell in the air. Not such a bad smell, though one most people wouldn't like. I'd always been partial to certain chemical smells, and this one . . . I said, "Y'know, it kind of smells like an oxygenated synthetics plant."

Minnie gave me an odd look, then we were inside, Minnie going head down in the instruments, while Willy put the sample in a vice, slipped his toes in foot restrains and broke it up, faceplate and all.

Only one spare of everything, I thought. We'll need to be more careful . . .

Sarah got out the camera equipment, while I settled myself in front of the infosys console, popping the old Logitech MiniView KVM switch we'd pulled out of my office, looking at various screens. I said, "Okay, guys. Everything's up and running."

Long silence. Then Minnie said, "Well . . ."

Watching the raw data scroll by, I thought, Good thing *one* of us knows about this stuff. Willy was trained as an aerospace engineer, Sarah as a mathematician, and I was trained as nothing, just an old mechanic smart enough to think his way into the depths of software design.

Minnie said, "These are some *very* nice aliphatic hydrocarbons we've got here."

Willy said, "What the . . . look over there. Six-carbon ring, some double bonds, with nitrogen crap all over it. . . ."

I felt old, old knowledge surface out of nowhere, things I'd forgotten I ever knew. My dad had been a geologist too, in the long ago and far away, and I'd taken quite a few organic chemistry courses before flunking out of my first attempt at college, back at the tail end of the 1960s. Out of the blue, I said, "When it has the CH_3 and the two extra hydrogen radicals, it's called toluene."

Willy's head jerked out of the binocular eyepieces, looking at me, astounded. "And the nitrogen?"

Minnie's giggle tinkled. "You need a refresher course in organics, don't you? Think about what you'd call a cyclohydrocarbon compound with three NO_2 radicals sticking out of it like that!"

Must be nice, knowing stuff like that. I started typing notes for the article, alongside the data flow. You never know.

Willy seemed to stutter. "Uh . . . I guess these layered sheets of hex ring must be fragments of . . . graphite?"

I choked suddenly, making them both look. "Not necessarily. You *could* crack it out as isomers of n-hexane and -heptane. I guess . . ."

Their mouths popped open in two little O's, making me laugh.

Willy looked away, then, softly, said, "What a scientist you would've made if you'd been able to get a real education."

I laughed again, nothing sensible to say in response. "Explains the *smell*, don't it?"

He said, "I guess so." He looked back at the data flow, and said, "Hard to imagine this stuff just forming out here."

I said, "Maybe little green zombies from the Phantom Planet left it for us?"

His turn to laugh.

Sarah said, "What the hell are you *talking* about?"

Before I could answer, Minnie said, "Quasimodo is surfaced with CHON material, meaning B must've had its final processing out in the Kuiper belt, maybe even the Oort. Assume B is largely CHON, descended from your classic 'dirty snowball.' From its density, we know A has to be a stony-iron, formed close in."

Willy said, "Carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen. In a lot of old stories, I remember the authors assumed we'd be eating CHON someday."

Minnie said, "Ghaak!"

I said, "What do you call a mess of aliphatic hydrocarbon sludge?" and waited.

Moment of silence, then I saw Sarah's eyes light up. "I know. Petroleum."

Willy looked at her, suddenly respectful. "Well, yeah. And maybe a pool of it stuck between the two components of near-earth asteroid UB(2009)/21."

Sarah said, "A pool."

Minnie said, "I told you asking about the striated ridge linear orientation was a damned good question."

Willy said, "How does it happen on Earth? Dead ferns are made of the same stuff as CHON, that's why those old writers thought we'd be eating it one day. Then all you need is time, temperature, and pressure."

I said, "Pretty cold out in the Oort."

Minnie said, "Not to mention the Oort cloud. But A and B are two distinct entities with wildly different histories. Just because they went splat and stuck together way back when doesn't mean they haven't been in *slightly* different orbits, grinding away against each other for however long it's been, converting orbital kinetic energy into thermal energy . . ."

It was left to Sarah to say, "And CHON particles into oil."

A day or so later, I sat strapped in my flight engineer's seat, head tipped back, looking out through the cupola dome. From this perspective, Quasimodo seemed to have tumbled head first toward the Sun, light shining on its bald pate, and also on that bit of neck where we'd been, fresh little scar just barely visible next to the old, two rusty little flecks of tar, like scabs on a vampire's bite.

I imagined the glob of asphalt sailing slowly away, in its own orbit now, and thought, There must be other ones out there as well, little spurts of paving material drifting around the Sun. Well. This is the only one with geological sampling tools stuck in it.

After a little argument, we'd decided it was safe to move *Excelsior* in close to the asteroid, not really in orbit, more sort of co-orbital around the Sun. We don't have a drill-rig anymore, so it's not that likely to squirt oil or tar or whatever all over our main ride home.

For safety's sake, we'd gone down in one ship only, leaving the other one aloft for an added safety margin, knowing if anything went wrong on the surface, we could probably get back up on EVA jetpacks alone.

Buck Rogers? Well, no. Buck rode a coal mine into the future and wound up fighting the Chinamen from Outer Space. Still, you know what I mean.

We'd taken more samples, brought down the little Standard ARM pen-

non with its cute comet logo, read our statement about how we were claiming ownership of UB(2009)/21, Outer Space Treaty or no Outer Space Treaty. We did our best to take high definition photos with Willy's expensive digital camera, and had a hard time with the foursome shots, because it didn't occur to anyone the tripod wouldn't work so well in the near absence of gravity.

Back aboard ship, we'd chirped into the comsat system to get CNN's attention, gotten them to set up the secure link we'd arranged, then given another one of those long, halting interviews to Ms. Clanton. When we sent in the recordings, there was a short break while she watched, then her next transmission began, "There'll be hell to pay over this, you know."

But she was grinning all the same.

Hell to pay is money in the bank to a TV journalist.

About an hour after the interview was broadcast, CNN called again, reestablishing the secure link, and let us know they'd been asked to provide us with wireless broadband through their satellite, so we could get to our email accounts, among other things.

I'm sure they expected they'd be able to read the data flow, and they got what they expected. I let Willy and Sarah handle the government and media howling. I'd already figured what might happen, so I'd set up an Internet-based VPN interface with the hardware in the network at my business office.

Not some commercial crap, either.

I do this for a living, and I doubt the Homeland Security hackers would even know there were extra packets going out over CNN's bandwidth. Maybe some geeks in Redmond would be able to get in, but only if it occurred to them to look.

There were tens of thousands of messages waiting in the public mailboxes of Alan Burke Enterprises, everybody under the sun wanting everything from a piece of the action to our hides nailed to the barn door. Sometimes both. But in the special accounts I'd set up, there were only six, and only one of those really mattered.

I said, "Guys? ExxonMobil is offering ten billion USD for the rights to UB(2009)/21. They also want our prospecting data, so they can decide which other NEAs are worth looking at."

Sarah whistled. "I wouldn't have thought . . ."

Willy said, "Anybody else?"

"Not even in the ballpark."

"Huh. That's going to make it hard to negotiate the price up some. I mean a bidding war . . ."

Minnie said, "Oil is everything to our civilization."

I said, "And our technology is geared to use it. Everything from rocket fuel to plastics feedstock. Until fusion power reactors running off helium-3 stop being a pipe dream, this stuff's going to be worth its weight in . . . oh, hell. Worth so much if there hadn't been any here, they'd've had to ship it up by rocket."

Willy said, "So what'll we say?"

I said, "Yes, obviously, but meanwhile . . ." the keyboard rattled as I typed.

Willy said, "Hey! We need to talk . . ."

I said, "Oh, I'm not emailing ExxonMobil yet. This is just a note to AndrewsSpace, putting down a deposit on one of those ships."

That stopped them cold. After a minute, eyes very far away, he said, "I wonder if I'll be in good enough shape for this, when the time comes . . ."

I laughed. "Willy, I'm ten years older right now than you'll be in 2022! And if you think you're going without me, guess again."

Outside, Quasimodo tumbled in the sun, shining gray and black, and it was maybe another thirty seconds before where I was and what I'd just said grabbed my soul and flung it out to the stars. ○

Author's Note:

First of all, a word of appreciation for Michael Capobianco, who did substantial research on a much earlier version of this story, and for Kevin J. Anderson, who sent me a most amusing critique of that original tale. Thanks, guys! And Kevin, you'll notice I took your advice about not naming the two spaceships Hesperornis and Rhamphorynchus . . .

Second?

EVERYTHING IN THIS STORY IS TRUE.

Not true in the sense that it's already been done, but in the even more important sense that if you have a great big steaming wad of cash burning a hole in your pocket, there are real companies that already have every product and gizmo in the story not just in the form of imaginative viewgraphs, but in the design stage and beyond, many of them already under construction. There's no single item in the story that costs more than a few tens of millions of dollars, and if you've got the bucks, you can buy the Buck Rogers.

In fact, the entire scenario played out in the story can be had for under a billion dollars. Admittedly, that's a lot of money for a business hacker like me, who missed out on the dotcom gravy train because he was writing science fiction stories instead of paying attention, but there are plenty of people who've got that much laying around, and more.

As to where . . .

Go to www.spacex.com and you'll see that Elon Musk and his employees at Space Exploration Technologies, Inc. have been awarded \$278 million by NASA for the purposes of building the Dragon commercial manned spacecraft. That would be Fafnir and Smaug in the story. In just a couple years, I'm sure he'll be glad to sell you one, and launch it into space atop a Falcon 9 rocket. And yes, Elon Musk is indeed the PayPal guy, who was paying attention when I was not.

Go to www.rocketplane.kistler.com and you'll find everything you want to know about the Kistler K-1 reusable two-stage-to-orbit launch vehicle. Kistler tried and failed to build the K-1 cargo rocket in the 1990s, and finally went bankrupt. For a while, it seemed like the end of the trail, until the remains were bought by Rocketplane Limited, and resurrected to a new life. Now RpK, as it's called for short, has a \$207 million contract from NASA to get their rocket up and flying.

And that's just the two winners of the government-sponsored COTS competition for a Commercial Orbital Transportation System. There were losing competitors as well, and some of them intend to proceed, one way or another.

Go to www.spacehab.com and you'll see that the company that makes

the SpaceHab payload-bay cargo module for the Space Shuttle had a proposal to build a big cargo module called the Apex 400, which would fly interchangeably atop any of the world's big launchers. It would be a useful thing to have, and I hope they still build it. In the story, it's called Excelsior, and I suspect if you showed up with money and an order, they'd consider building one for you. They already know how.

Go to www.bigelow-aerospace.com and there you'll find a wealthy hotelier determined to set up an orbital hotel. Pipe dream? Not at all. The Genesis-1 test module is in orbit right now, and it worked so well the Genesis program will end with Genesis-2, which will have flown long before you read this. Next up, Sundancer, which will act as a prototype for the orbital hotel, and as a target for America's Space Prize, \$50 million to anyone who can demonstrate the ability to get up there repeatedly, without taking any government money to do the job. In the story, I called the orbital honeymoon hotel Exodus. I think it's a damn fine name, and I hope Robert Bigelow will consider it, when the time comes.

Need a methane/liquid oxygen main engine for your interplanetary spacecraft, even though NASA has decided it's too iffy for the Orion moonship? Go to www.xcor.com and there you'll see a company that's got smaller engines designed, built and tested. A larger methane/LOX engine is merely a matter of demand. If not, you still might find the Rocket Racing League entertaining.

This is just scratching the surface, of course. the t\Space consortium at www.transformspace.com didn't win either the COTS competition or the CEV competition, but their designs are sound and innovative. The CXV air-launched manned spacecraft may well make it into orbit, and will certainly be cheaper to fly than anything except the Kistler K-1. And if it does? Well, their CEV design will make an ideal all-purpose planetary lander, not just for the Moon, but for Mars and beyond. We'll need it someday, one way or another.

Finally, go to www.andrews-space.com and take a good look. Especially take a look at the Mini-Mag Orion design. It's a practical, buildable fusion-drive interplanetary spacecraft waiting in the wings. It would take a pile of money and determination to bring something like that to fruition, but no more money than is already earmarked by Congress to fund the nation's long-delayed return to the Moon, and a whole lot less than has already been spent on the International Space Station. With it, you could get anywhere in the inner solar system, and a little beyond. If I had one, I'd stick a t\Space CEV on the nose, fly on out to Callisto, and make a landing.

*I've written a number of stories about futures we lost due to stupidity, for example "Harvest Moon" (Asimov's, September 2005). And once upon a time, Michael Capobianco and I wrote a book called *Fellow Traveler* (Bantam Books, July 1991) about a splendidly possible future that crashed and burned away to nothing at all in the weeks and months following the book's publication. Politics and short-sightedness took those futures away before they could happen. This story is about the next such future, looming up before us with the promise of a bright new tomorrow.*

Maybe this time, the dream will come true. Either way, we'll soon know. Keep your fingers crossed. And if you happen to have a few hundred million dollars you don't need right away, I've got some cool ideas. . . .

LILYANNA

Lisa Goldstein

Lisa Goldstein has published eleven novels, the most recent being *The Alchemist's Door* from Tor Books. She has spent the last four years as Isabel Glass, and has written two books under this name; the latest is *The Divided Crown*. Her novel *The Red Magician* won the American Book Award for Best Paperback. Her novels and short stories have been finalists for the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards. She has worked as a proofreader, library aide, bookseller, and reviewer, and she lives in Oakland, California, with her husband and their cute dog Spark. Her website, which includes pictures of Spark, is www.brazenhussies.net/goldstein.

Sometimes after the library closes I walk through the dim rooms, savoring the quiet. I put books back in order, and straighten the displays, and take down the outdated fliers on the community bulletin board. Then I put on my coat, turn out the last light, and go home.

Today the disorder the patrons had left was worse than usual, books scattered on tables and counters and across the floor. The days when libraries were havens of silence, the only sounds a muffled cough and a scratch of a pen on paper, are long gone, I'm afraid. People talk and laugh as if they're at a ball game, or answer their cell phones, or call out to one another when they see a book they recognize. Around three-thirty the after-schoolers come in, looking for something to do until their parents get off work and pick them up. Mostly they gossip, or sit at the computers and play games; occasionally one of them will read something, but it's usually a comic book.

I picked up the books and stacked them into piles. It's a small library I work in, in a small town down the peninsula from San Francisco, just two rooms for adult fiction and nonfiction and two for the juvenile sections. The clean-up took only a few minutes. Then I put the books into the bin to be checked in the next day, in case a patron had checked them out and forgotten them.

A piece of paper fluttered out from one of them and fell to the floor. I picked it up and turned it over. It was a photograph, black and white, a

picture of a woman. She looked like a movie star, with the sort of beauty they used to have when they all looked like kings and queens, distant and regal. Perhaps she really had been a star, but if so I didn't recognize her.

I studied her a while longer. Her hair was light brown, and her wide-set eyes could have been the same color, though the black and white of the photograph made it hard to tell; they could just as easily have been gray. Her mouth was that bow shape that had been popular generations ago; it looked dark in the photograph, and I thought she might have been wearing red lipstick.

None of this explains why I thought her beautiful, though. It was something impossible to define, a matter of the curve of a cheekbone, the straight line of a forehead. A few millimeters one way or the other and she would have looked different, entirely ordinary.

The actress she reminded me of most was Greta Garbo. I went over to the movie section (791.43) and took down a book on her, but I saw I'd been wrong; they were not very much alike. But both seemed luminous somehow, as if a light shone from inside them.

I learned from the book that Garbo had not said "I want to be alone," the quote everyone attributes to her, but "I want to be left alone," which makes more sense. Librarians, I sometimes think, know a great deal of useless trivia about a great variety of subjects.

I wished I had thought to check which book the photograph had come from, but there were too many in the bin now to make a guess. I pattered around some more, then went to my cubbyhole of an office, just behind the circulation area, and put the photo in a desk drawer. I straightened the plastic sign that said "Harris Kent, Librarian" and checked the empty rooms again—there was no one waiting for me at home, after all—and caught a later bus home.

We were busy as usual the next day. I stayed in my office, doing paperwork and ordering books, coming out when the library aides needed help. I saw the Crossword Puzzle Guy, there in the mid-morning as always—he Xeroxes the puzzle from the *New York Times*, fills it in in ink, and leaves it behind him on the front table. After he left, a high school student came in, obviously truant. He'd been here a few times before, and had even asked me for help finding information about anoles, which turned out to be a kind of lizard. I'd shown him how to use the encyclopedia (*what* do they teach them in schools these days?), and later he graduated to the Internet. If he kept skipping school I'd have to talk to him or his parents or guardian, but for now I left him alone; he was probably learning more here than in his classroom.

Every so often I opened my drawer and took out the photograph. Looking at it made me feel as if I were turning on a light in a dark room, as if something were being made clear, illuminated.

I've always liked photographs, the way they're the same each time you look at them, predictable, even comforting. So much else goes by so quickly, changes even before you've had a chance to notice it.

Once when I studied the photograph I saw something new: the woman looked a bit like someone I'd dated in college. Nina had had the same breathtaking beauty, and she, too, had seemed set apart by it, a visitor

from some other, better, realm. I'd never understood why she'd gone out with me. I wear glasses, my hair is the dull color of meatloaf, and I'm tall and skinny—though at least, I used to think, Nina and I were the same height.

Usually the thought of her brought back a confusion of feelings, love and loss and regret, but this time the mysterious woman crowded out everything else. Who was she? Where had she come from? What had happened to her?

I went to lunch, came back. The mob of kids came in after school, talking noisily. Some of them towed bookbags on wheels; you have to wonder about the amount of homework they get. Fortunately the children's librarian deals with them; only rarely does she call me for help.

The time slid toward closing. The patrons headed toward the doors, and I turned off some of the lights. A woman dashed in; she knew what she wanted, she said, it would just take a minute. I knew this type of patron of old, and sure enough she was still standing in front of the fiction shelves when we closed. I sent the aides and the children's librarian home and talked to her a bit about the bestseller list; then it turned out that she didn't have a library card and I had to process one for her.

It was ten minutes after closing when I finally shut down the computer and made my rounds through the empty rooms. My footsteps echoed back to me, muffled by the rows of books; when I accidentally dropped a pen the sound lingered for a while, suspended in the silence. This was the way libraries used to sound, I thought, like nothing else in the world.

I picked up books from when they had been left (or thrown—one of them lay open on its back, looking disturbingly helpless, like a dead body). As I carried them to the bin a scrap of paper fell out and drifted to the floor.

I grabbed it on its way down. It was a ticket stub, an old one, pre-printed instead of spat out from a computer. It had been torn in half; the part I held read "Para" and, on the next line, "Thea."

That sparked a vague memory. I put the books down and went to the local history section (979.46). I found it in the third book I checked: a brief history of the Paramount theater in Oakland. The place had been a movie palace from 1931 to 1970, though it had had to shut down once during the Depression. I studied the angular gold and green lights of the main entrance, the statues of golden women marching toward a great gold fountain, and as I did so a strange notion took hold of me: that the woman in the photograph had held this ticket, had gone to this performance.

It was crazy, delusional. And yet the idea wouldn't leave me. I saw her striding through the front door in a short jacket and a long slim skirt, a mannish hat with a feather on her head, looking up at her companion from under the brim. At the intermission she took out a cigarette and went to the women's lounge (amazingly, according to the book, women were not allowed to smoke in public then) and discussed the movie with the other smokers. If my guess was right and she was an actress, perhaps she would have known something about the stars. The other women might even have recognized her, might have listened intently as she gossiped about the leading man.

I re-shelved the history and went back to the pile of books I'd collected earlier. This time I'd seen the one the ticket had come from, and I checked the title; it was *The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up*. The books themselves weren't relevant, then, just the messages they contained.

I put the ticket in my drawer, together with the photograph, and left. When I got home I made dinner and then settled down with a book I'd checked out. The quiet at the end of the day was welcome, but even as I read I was aware that it wasn't the same as the hushed silence of the library. It didn't have the weight of history behind it, the great edifice built of kings and explorers, poets and philosophers, books about carpentry and cat care and trains and when to plant dahlias, all the knowledge and wisdom of the world.

The next day crept by slowly. I was eager to be left alone (like Garbo) and see if the books would yield up something new. I kept seeing vague glimmers out of the corner of my eye, a blur of white like the sway of a skirt or the turning of a page, but when I looked there would be nothing there. Finally everyone left; I shut the door behind them and turned the sign to Closed.

"Are you doing anything tonight?" someone said behind me.

I jumped. It was only the children's librarian, Amy, coming out of the back. I muttered something about a dinner meeting, and she shrugged and left.

I was actually trembling as I walked through the library, picking up books and rifling through their pages, turning them upside down and shaking them to dislodge any stray pieces of paper. My heart pounded so loudly I could hear it in the silence. I made myself go slower, straightening each pile of books carefully and setting them gently in the bin.

Amy and I had gone out for a drink once. Afterward she had invited me to her house. I had felt awkward, filled with trepidation; I hadn't known what she wanted, hadn't known what I wanted for that matter. It was one of those moments where a life could change in an instant, some decision made that could never be taken back.

I needn't have worried. She lived with her three children, two dogs, and a parrot, who shouted "Abandon all hope!" when we walked through the door. Her ex-husband, I soon discovered, lived over the garage and had been taking care of the kids, only two of which were his. One of the dogs was recovering from some complex surgery and wore that collar that looks like a giant Elizabethan ruff. He had fixed ideas about how big he was, ideas that did not include the collar, and kept bumping into things. Perhaps it was only in memory that he bumped into me more than anything else.

The ex-husband made his living from entering contests, and Amy's

"Asimov's bought my first story, 'Ever After' (December 1984). I'd already published two novels by then, and I was beginning to think I was going to be one of those authors who could only write novels. Since then, of course, I've given you almost all of my short stories. Best wishes on your thirtieth birthday."

—Lisa Goldstein

walls were stacked with computer games and lifetime supplies of hair product; he had run out of space to store them all. As we sat on her couch, trying to talk over children's demands and the parrot's squawking, a postal truck pulled up, setting off a round of barking from the dogs, and disgorged more boxes.

I noticed for the first time that evening that she was quite pretty—though perhaps cute might be a better word, with her frizzy blond hair, snub nose, and freckles. And I had never realized how short she was; she barely came up to my shoulders.

She turned out to be an interesting woman, too, more thoughtful than I would have expected from her surroundings. "Sometimes I feel like I'm walking down a long hallway, and doors are closing all around me," she said. "There are so many things I wanted to do, things I thought I'd get around to when I was older. Like go to exotic places and write books about them, and learn how to sail, and speak Spanish, and make pottery . . . And have kids, of course, but it's the kids that are keeping me from all the rest of it. You can't do everything, I guess is what I'm saying. Do you know what I mean?"

I didn't, not really. She had her hands full, more than full; she seemed to be doing enough for several people already.

"Well, but you're still young, younger than I am," I said. "There's still time for all that." But she looked at me as if my answer had disappointed her.

I never went back. I'm not sure why, really. All the time I was with her I kept thinking about Nina, the way she used to stride forward on those long legs, the way she always seemed to know where she was going, even when she was lost. And Amy's life looked too confusing, there were too many things to take in at once.

I finished making the rounds of the library. There had been no messages from the books, not a scrap of paper to be found. I cursed myself for an idiot. I had built up something out of nothing, a ludicrous fantasy. I felt a mad urge to take every book off the shelf and shake them until they gave up their secrets. Instead I took a last look at the photograph and headed for the door.

I caught the glimmer of white again, but this time it did not go away when I looked directly at it. It was a pearl someone had dropped. As I bent to pick it up I remembered the photograph, the pearl earrings the woman wore.

I'd memorized the photograph by this time, of course, but I went back to my office to look at it one more time. The earrings shone white as a shell, nacreous and pale.

No, it was ridiculous. Someone had dropped the damn thing; that was all. Despite my protests, though, I put the pearl in my drawer along with the photograph and the ticket stub.

The next evening, as I went through my usual routine, I swung between hope and something very like despair. I told myself not to expect much, either a maddeningly vague clue or nothing at all. What I found was a piece of paper partly covered in writing. I read a few lines, then had to sit at a table to stop my heart from pounding.

"Dear Selwyn—" it said.

"It's not like you to be so horrible. What I said was a joke, of course. I don't give a fig for your work, and I'm sure Edith doesn't either. And what you told us was hardly damning—unless, as you said, your boss should come to hear about it. And there's no reason he should, not if you're as careful as you say you are.

"I'll be at the Pearl on Tuesday night, as always. I hope I'll see you there. I never have as much fun without you—none of the others have your spirit and generosity.

"Lilyanna"

I thought a hundred things all at once. That now I knew her name. That her handwriting was bold and a bit old-fashioned, with more flourishes than someone would use today, especially in her headlong dashes. That she had written on creamy linen paper; she could afford luxuries, perhaps, or she cared about how she looked.

Most of all I wondered what it meant. What terrible thing did Selwyn do at work? Who was Edith, and who were the others? It was one of those frustrating stories that don't make sense if you come in in the middle, and it was dreadful to think that I might never know the answers.

There was a date at the top; I hadn't seen it in my rush to read the letter. October 12, 1938. I tried to remember the date today, and realized with growing amazement that it was also October the 12th.

All my doubts disappeared. I was meant to find this letter, and to find it now. In fact—and suddenly the notion seemed as clear to me as if it was written on the piece of paper I held—I could find her, Lilyanna, meet her at the Pearl on Tuesday. The only problem, of course, was that I had no idea where the place could be.

I went to the circulation desk, too much in a hurry even to go to my office, and turned on the computer. I searched for "Pearl" together with various cities around the Bay Area and got nothing but gibberish. There were, I was surprised to see, a few hits for "Lilyanna," but the people mentioned were all too old or too young or in another country. So much for my thought that she might be a movie star.

A man tapped at the glass on the door; he'd seen me and thought the library was still open, despite the Closed sign and the dim lights. I ignored him. He knocked harder, and I waved him off impatiently. Finally he dumped his books in the outside bin and strode off, no doubt writing an irate letter to the library board in his head.

I turned back to the computer. It was Friday now; I had a few days yet to track her down. I clicked on another link for Lilyanna and found an office-worker's diary. But she was far too young, and Lilyanna would never work in an office.

Suddenly I realized just how old she had to be. If she was twenty in 1938, say, she would be nearly ninety today. Probably she was dead.

But of course I wasn't thinking of her as old. In my mind she was still the woman in the photograph, luminous, mysterious. What did that mean? Was she haunting me, haunting the library?

I got off the computer, stood up and stretched, and went through the library shutting off the lights. As I headed toward the front door I saw the

swirl of white again, and I turned quickly. It took on shape, moving slowly in the shadows. The unfurling of a skirt, the turn of a pale leg . . .

The library seemed colder now, the shadows in the distant corners blacker. I stood still, my skin clammy. No, I was imagining the chill, the darkness—why would she want to frighten me? I groped for a light switch and turned it on, and she frayed into nothingness and disappeared.

I was trembling now. I went into my office and grabbed the photograph, the ticket, and the pearl. Then I left, locking the door firmly behind me.

Outside the moon shone from behind the clouds, but otherwise the street was dark. I walked quickly toward the bus stop, toward light and people. I got home very late; only then, when I looked at my bedside clock, did I realize that I'd been on the computer for hours.

In the morning the fear from last night seemed unreal. Lilyanna needed me; she had sought me out for some task she had left unfinished in life. She was remote in the picture, yes, and as regal as an effigy on a tomb, but she would never harm me.

What had prompted me to turn on the light again, to make her vanish like that? I could have seen her whole, talked to her, found out what she wanted at last.

I dressed and went to my computer. It sometimes seems odd to me that someone who distrusts change as much as I do should take to the Internet, but in fact I like it a great deal. It's like a library in many ways, a library built out of an infinity of knowledge. A library of the air.

As the morning waned, though, I began to think the whole thing was impossible. How could I guess what the word "pearl" meant to Lilyanna and her friends? In desperation I left the main thoroughfares of the search engines and headed down dirt roads and dim alleyways, sites tended by obsessives interested in movies or jewelry or the thirties.

I broke for lunch. Sun came through the kitchen window, and I began to wonder about my own obsessiveness. What was Lilyanna to me, after all? Why was I wasting all this time on someone I had never met? I sat in my kitchen, in the warmth and light, eating a chicken sandwich I'd made out of leftovers, and my mind strayed to other things: Nina, of course, and work I'd left unfinished at the library, and the book I was reading. Then the tattered clouds returned, shrouding the sun, and I went back to Lilyanna and the Pearl.

On Sunday I visited a few of the places I'd seen on the Internet, restaurants and bars and businesses with the word "pearl" in their names. I had no car, which had never seemed like a hardship before; I enjoyed taking the bus to work. But I soon found out that many of the routes were slower than my usual bus, and that the Bay Area Rapid Transit line didn't run anywhere near where I wanted to go. I planned to go to Oakland first, because of the connection with the Paramount, but as time passed I realized that just the places in Oakland would take the whole day.

The first three sites I tried had not even existed in the thirties. I continued on, growing discouraged as I saw business after business dating from the eighties or nineties.

It was near midnight when I finally quit and headed for home. The

streets were cold and silent; I heard nothing but my own footsteps. Every so often a car drove by, its lights glowing out of the darkness and then passing on. My bus stop was dark as well, the street lamp next to it burned out.

A pale shape came toward me out of the shadows. I jumped back, but it was only a man in a white T-shirt, strange clothing for such a cold night. He was saying something, but I was filled with such a mixture of terror and excitement I could barely hear him. "What?" I said.

"Very few buses this late on Sunday," he said. He seemed unconcerned, and as I came closer and could smell him I realized that he had been drinking for a while. "Take a half hour for the next one."

It proved to be over an hour. I felt nervous standing near someone so unpredictable, but he did not make any more sudden moves. The town I lived in was so small, and I was usually indoors so early, that I had forgotten how to deal with people like him, had lost whatever edge I'd once had.

It was after midnight when I finally got home and went to bed. I could not sleep, though; when I closed my eyes I saw wisps of white gathering in the darkness, and I would come awake, my heart pounding.

On Mondays the people who work in the library always ask each other how their weekends were. I don't know why they continue to ask me, since my days off are horribly dull; I usually spend them gardening or reading or listening to music. Today they joked about how tired I looked, what a wild weekend I must have had. Amy said nothing, but I saw her eyes on me a few times, as if she wanted to ask me a question. To be honest, I wouldn't have known how to answer her; anything I said would have sounded crazy. Would have been crazy, for all I knew.

I worked on the circulation desk that day, giving each returned book a surreptitious shake before putting it away, trying not to scowl at the patrons when they asked for information or directions. But there was nothing in any of the books, not even the scraps of torn paper people use for bookmarks. I kept glancing at my watch, willing the time to pass; I was almost certain that I would find the next clue only after everyone had gone home.

Finally the library closed, and I locked the door and made my usual rounds. For a long time I found nothing, and I grew more and more discouraged as I went on. Then one of the books surrendered a piece of paper: a napkin with an address printed at the bottom. In the blank space someone had drawn a row of beads, curving upward like a smile. A pearl necklace.

The place was in Oakland; I'd been right about that, at least. There was no zip code, of course; they hadn't existed in 1938. I hurried to the computer and looked up the address, then linked to a site that showed me which bus to take.

Something glimmered near the history shelves, as pale as snow. I turned, and in that moment I saw her plain, a woman made of pearl and paper, coalescing out of the darkness. A cold wind came up, bringing the smell of old books.

I could feel her need, her desire to be avenged. I took a step toward her,

trying to ignore the thrill of terror that ran through my veins. She vanished slowly, like mist.

Thoughts of her intruded as I tried to sleep that night. What had Selwyn done? Perhaps he had joined the Communist Party, like a lot of people in the thirties. Or maybe he had embezzled money; it was the Depression, after all, and he needed to pay for all those theater tickets and drinks at the Pearl. Hadn't Lilyanna said she liked his generosity?

I had a dark thought then. Had she blackmailed him? You could certainly read the note that way, as Lilyanna asking for money. "Unless your boss should come to hear about it," she'd said. And "if you're as careful as you say you are."

I got up and studied the photo again. No, I couldn't believe it—no one who looked like that could stoop to blackmail.

I set out all I had of Lilyanna: the photo, the pearl, the note, the napkin. For the first time I noticed a stain at the corner of the napkin, a small spot of red. Was it blood? No, of course not. It was much more likely to be food, or lipstick.

But I couldn't stop thinking about the two of them, what they had done. Had Selwyn grown tired of her demands for money and finally killed her? Or had she killed him? Either would explain her urgency, and the fear I sometimes felt in her presence. Her story was darker than I had supposed.

When I got to work the next day I put the photograph on my desk before I did anything else. I couldn't stop staring at it, drawn over and over again to that pale face, those imperious eyes.

The sun came out in the afternoon, that strange California weather that refuses to relinquish summer, even in October. It relaxed me for a moment, and when Amy knocked at my office I looked up, glad of the distraction. I was not so relaxed, though, to forget the picture, and I eased it under a magazine as she stepped inside.

"Are you busy?" she asked.

"No, no," I said. "What is it?"

"A kid just asked me for *The Lying Bitch and Her Wardrobe*," she said.

I laughed. "What did you say?"

"Well, I took him to the C.S. Lewis section, but that wasn't the book he wanted. I think he was expecting something else."

We talked for a while about the odd requests we had gotten (*The Four Horsemen of the Acropolis*, *Color Me Purple*), and I asked her how the dog was, and we discussed library business. When she left I realized with a start that an hour had passed, and that I had barely thought of Lilyanna. How could I have forgotten her? I felt horrified, guilty. I felt like a knight who had been sent out on a quest by his lady-love and who had strayed from the path, diverted by pleasures of the flesh or good company.

But my fear was growing, fear of what I might find, and of Lilyanna, too. I was out of my depth, had stumbled into a quarrel not my own. What if she had murdered someone, what then?

I started to shiver. But I was sweating too; my palms were damp with it. What had I gotten myself into? Who was Lilyanna to come into my life like this? She had snared me with a photograph, beguiled me with trin-

kets—with the dead past, things that never changed. She had seen how steadfast I would be, that *I* would never change. Amy's doors had never closed for me; they had never been opened.

I welcomed the anger; it drove out the terror I felt. Perhaps I wouldn't go to the Pearl that night. Why should I be the one to revenge her? I had my own life to live, after all.

One of the aides came through, shouting that the library would close in fifteen minutes. The hell with it, I thought. I stood, my heart pounding, and went to the children's section. My fear rose again and I pushed it away, tried to ignore it.

I waited until Amy finished helping a kid with her homework; then I said, "Would you like to go to dinner with me tonight?"

She looked surprised, and a bit wary. "All right," she said.

The room grew colder. The children fell silent for once, as if they felt it too. A blur of white moved in the corner and took on shape.

Amy was saying something, and I forced myself to pay attention. "Oh, wait. Don's going to be late tonight—I have to feed the kids."

"I could meet you when you're done. How about seven?"

"That would be good."

Lilyanna turned toward me, her face filled with sorrow. She faded slowly and disappeared.

"Seven, then," I said, and went back to the circulation area.

The aides folded up the newspapers, straightened the chairs, and went home. The last patron left; then Amy came out from the children's area, and I held the door open for her, smiling.

What would I do until seven? I locked the door and walked through the empty rooms, shutting off lights as I went. I could feel Lilyanna's absence throughout the library. I picked up a pile of books, brought them back to the bin.

I felt as if I had been living in a lurid nightmare the past few days, and that I had finally woken up. Lilyanna had seduced me with beauty and mystery, but in the end I had chosen life over death. I would never find out who Selwyn was, what had happened between him and Lilyanna, and I knew I would always wonder about it, but at the moment it seemed a small loss.

I turned out the last light and headed toward the door. A shape flew at me out of the darkness, white as a shroud, its mouth red as blood. I ran for the door, but it was locked. I fumbled for my keys. ○

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DISTANT REPLAY

Mike Resnick

According to *Locus*, Mike Resnick has won more awards for short science fiction than any other writer, living or dead. His last *Asimov's* story, "Down Memory Lane" (April/May 2005), was a Hugo nominee and recently won Spain's Ignotus Award. His latest novel, from Pyr, is *Starship: Pirate*.

The first time I saw her she was jogging in the park. I was sitting on a bench, reading the paper like I do every morning. I didn't pay much attention to her, except to note the resemblance.

The next time was in the supermarket. I'd stopped by to replenish my supply of instants—coffee, creamer, sweetener—and this time I got a better look at her. At first I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. At seventy-six, it wouldn't be the first time that had happened.

Two nights later I was in Vincenzo's Ristorante, which has been my favorite Italian joint for maybe forty years—and there she was again. Not only that, but this time she was wearing my favorite blue dress. Oh, the skirt was a little shorter, and there was something different about the sleeves, but it was the dress, all right.

It didn't make any sense. She hadn't looked like this in more than four decades. She'd been dead for seven years, and if she was going to come back from the grave, why the hell hadn't she come directly to me? After all, we'd spent close to half a century together.

I walked by her, ostensibly on my way to the men's room, and the smell hit me while I was still five feet away from her. It was the same perfume she'd worn every day of our lives together.

But she was sixty-eight when she'd died, and now she looked exactly the way she looked the very first time I saw her. I tried to smile at her as I passed her table. She looked right through me.

I got to the men's room, rinsed my face off, and took a look in the mirror, just to make sure I was still seventy-six years old and hadn't dreamed the last half century. It was me, all right: not much hair on the top, in need of a trim on the sides, one eye half-shut from the mini-stroke I denied having except in increasingly rare moments of honesty, a tiny scab on my chin where I'd cut myself shaving. (I can't stand those new-fangled elec-

tric razors, though since they've been around as long as I have, I guess they're not really so new-fangled after all.)

It wasn't much of a face on good days, and now it had just seen a woman who was the spitting image of Deirdre.

When I came out she was still there, sitting alone, picking at her dessert.

"Excuse me," I said, walking up to her table. "Do you mind if I join you for a moment?"

She looked at me as if I was half-crazy. Then she looked around, making sure that the place was crowded in case she had to call for help, decided I looked harmless enough, and finally she nodded tersely.

"Thank you," I said. "I just want to say that you look exactly like someone I used to know, even down to the dress and the perfume."

She kept staring at me, but didn't answer.

"I should introduce myself," I said, extending my hand. "My name is Walter Silverman."

"What do you want?" she asked, ignoring my hand.

"The truth?" I said. "I just wanted a closer look at you. You remind me so much of this other person." She looked dubious. "It's not a pick-up line," I continued. "Hell, I'm old enough to be your grandfather, and the staff will tell you I've been coming here for forty years and haven't molested any customers yet. I'm just taken by the resemblance to someone I cared for very much."

Her face softened. "I'm sorry if I was rude," she said, and I was struck by how much the voice sounded like *her* voice. "My name is Deirdre."

It was my turn to stare.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine," I said. "But the woman you look like was also named Deirdre." Another stare.

"Let me show you," I said, pulling out my wallet. I took my Deirdre's photo out and handed it to her.

"It's uncanny," she said, studying the picture. "We even sort of wear our hair the same way. When was this taken?"

"Forty-seven years ago."

"Is she dead?"

I nodded.

"Your wife?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry," she said. "She was a beautiful woman." Then, "I hope that doesn't sound conceited, since we look so much alike."

"Not at all. She *was* beautiful. And like I say, she even used the same perfume."

"That's very weird," she said. "Now I understand why you wanted to talk to me."

"It was like . . . like I'd suddenly stumbled back half a century in time," I said. "You're even wearing Deedee's favorite color."

"What did you say?"

"That you're wearing her—"

"No. I meant what you just called her."

"Deedee?" I asked. "That was my pet name for her."

"My friends call *me* Deedee," she said. "Isn't that odd?"

"May I call you that?" I said. "If we ever meet again, I mean?"

"Sure," she said with a shrug. "Tell me about yourself, Walter. Are you retired?"

"For the past dozen years," I said.

"Got any kids or grandkids?"

"No."

"If you don't work and you don't have family, what do you do with your time?" she asked.

"I read, I watch DVDs, I take walks, I Google a zillion things of interest on the computer." I paused awkwardly. "I hope it doesn't sound crazy, but mostly I just pass the time until I can be with Deedee again."

"How long were you married?"

"Forty-five years," I answered. "That photo was taken a couple of years before we were married. We had long engagements back then."

"Did she work?" asked Deirdre. "I know a lot of women didn't when you were young."

"She illustrated children's books," I said. "She even won a couple of awards."

Suddenly Deirdre frowned. "All right, Walter—how long have you been studying me?"

"Studying you?" I repeated, puzzled. "I saw you jogging a couple of days ago, and I watched you while I was eating. . . ."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"Why wouldn't you?" I asked.

"Because I'm an illustrator for children's magazines."

That was *too* many coincidences. "Say that again?"

"I illustrate children's magazines."

"What's your last name?" I asked.

"Why?" she replied suspiciously.

"Just tell me," I said, almost harshly.

"Aronson."

"Thank God!"

"What are you talking about?"

"My Deedee's maiden name was Kaplan," I said. "For a minute there I thought I was going crazy. If your name was Kaplan I'd have been sure of it."

"I'm sorry I lost my temper," said Deirdre. "This has been just a little . . . well . . . weird."

"I didn't mean to upset you," I said. "It was just, I don't know, like seeing my Deedee all over again, young and beautiful the way I remember her."

"Is that the way you always think of her?" she asked curiously. "The way she looked forty-five years ago?"

I pulled out another photo, taken the year before Deedee died. She was about forty pounds heavier, and her hair was white, and there were wrinkles around her eyes. I stared at it for a minute, then handed it to Deirdre.

"This is her, too," I said. "I'd look at her, and I'd see past the pounds and

the years. I think every woman is beautiful, each in her own way, and my Deedee was the most beautiful of all."

"It's a shame you're not fifty years younger," she said. "I could go for someone who feels that way."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I said nothing.

"What did your wife die of?" she asked at last.

"She was walking across the street, and some kid who was high on drugs came racing around the corner doing seventy miles an hour. She never knew what hit her." I paused, remembering that awful day. "The kid got six months' probation and lost his license. I lost Deedee."

"Did you see it happen?"

"No, I was still inside the store, paying for the groceries. I heard it, though. Sounded like a clap of thunder."

"That's terrible."

"At least she didn't feel any pain," I said. "I suppose there are worse ways to go. Slower ways, anyway. Most of my friends are busy discovering them."

Now it was her turn to be at a loss for an answer. Finally she looked at her watch. "I have to go, Walter," she said. "It's been . . . interesting."

"Perhaps we could meet again?" I suggested hopefully.

She gave me a look that said all her worst fears were true after all.

"I'm not asking for a date," I continued hastily. "I'm an old man. I'd just like to talk to you again. It'd be like being with Deedee again for a few minutes." I paused, half-expecting her to tell me that it was sick, but she didn't say anything. "Look, I eat here all the time. What if you came back a week from today, and we just talked during dinner? My treat. I promise not to follow you home, and I'm too arthritic to play footsie under the table."

She couldn't repress a smile at my last remark. "All right, Walter," she said. "I'll be your ghost from six to seven."

I was as nervous as a schoolboy a week later when six o'clock rolled around. I'd even worn a jacket and tie for the first time in months. (I'd also cut myself in three places while shaving, but I hoped she wouldn't notice.)

Six o'clock came and went, and so did six ten. She finally entered the place at a quarter after, in a blouse and slacks I could have sworn belonged to Deedee.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said, sitting down opposite me. "I was reading and lost track of the time."

"Let me guess," I said. "Jane Austen?"

"How did you know?" she asked, surprised.

"She was Deedee's favorite."

"I didn't say she was my favorite," said Deirdre.

"But she is, isn't she?" I persisted.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"Congrats to *Asimov's* on its thirtieth birthday. It's been a pleasure to be associated with the magazine as a reader, and an honor to be associated with it as a writer. Here's to another thirty years!"

—Mike Resnick

"Yes," she said at last.

We ordered our dinner—of course she had the eggplant parmesan; it was what Deedee always had—and then she pulled a couple of magazines out of her bag, one full-sized, one a digest, and showed me some illustrations she had done.

"Very good," I said. "Especially this one of the little blonde girl and the horse. It reminds me—"

"Of something your wife did?"

I nodded. "A long time ago. I haven't thought of it for years. I always liked it, but she felt she'd done many better ones."

"I've done better, too," said Deirdre. "But these were handy."

We spoke a little more before the meal came. I tried to keep it general, because I could see all these parallels with Deedee were making her uncomfortable. Vincenzo had his walls covered by photos of famous Italians; she knew Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin and Joe DiMaggio, but I spent a few minutes explaining what Carmine Basilio and Eddie Arcaro and some of the others had done to deserve such enshrinement.

"You know," I said as the salads arrived, "Deedee had a beautiful leatherbound set of Jane Austen's works. I never read them, and they're just sitting there gathering dust. I'd be happy to give them to you next week."

"Oh, I couldn't," she said. "They must be worth a small fortune."

"A very small one," I said. "Besides, when I die, they'll just wind up in the garbage, or maybe at Goodwill."

"Don't talk about dying like that," she said.

"Like what?"

"So matter-of-factly."

"The closer you get to it, the more a matter of fact it becomes," I said. "Don't worry," I added lightly. "I promise not to die before dinner's over. Now, about those Austen books . . ."

I could see her struggling with herself. "You're sure?" she said at last.

"I'm sure. You can have a matched set of the Brontës too, if you like."

"Thank you, but I don't really like them."

It figured. I don't think Deedee had ever cracked any of them open.

"All right," I said. "Just the Austen. I'll bring them next week."

Suddenly she frowned. "I don't think I can make it next week, Walter," she said. "My fiancé's been away on business, and I'm pretty sure that's the day he comes home."

"Your fiancé?" I repeated. "You haven't mentioned him before."

"We've only spoken twice," she replied. "I wasn't hiding the fact."

"Well, good for you," I said. "You must know by now that I'm a believer in marriage."

"I guess I am, too," she said.

"You guess?"

"Oh, I believe in marriage. I just don't know if I believe in marriage with Ron."

"Then why are you engaged to him?"

She shrugged. "I'm thirty-one. It was time. And he's nice enough."

"But?" I asked. "There's a 'but' in there somewhere."

"But I don't know if I want to spend the rest of my life with him." She paused, puzzled. "Now why did I tell you that?"

"I don't know," I replied. "Why do you think you did?"

"I don't know either," she said. "I just have this feeling that I can confide in you."

"I appreciate that," I said. "As for spending the rest of your life with your young man—hell, the way everyone gets married and divorced these days, maybe you won't have to."

"You sure know how to cheer a girl up, Walter," she said wryly.

"I apologize. Your private life is none of my business. I meant no offense."

"Fine." Then: "What shall we talk about?"

I thought about Deedee. Sooner or later we talked about everything under the sun, but her greatest passion was the theatre. "Whose work do you like better—Tom Stoppard's or Edward Albee's?"

Her face lit up, and I could tell she was going to spend the next ten minutes telling me exactly who she preferred, and why.

Somehow I wasn't surprised.

We skipped the following week, but met every week thereafter for the next three months. Ron even came along once, probably to make sure I was as old and unattractive as she'd described me. He must have satisfied himself on those counts, because he never came back. He seemed a nice enough young man, and he was clearly in love with her.

I ran into her twice at my local Borders and once at Barnes & Noble, and both times I bought her coffee. I knew I was falling in love with her—hell, I'd been in love with her from the first instant I saw her. But that's where it got confusing, because I knew I wasn't really in love with *her*; I was in love with the younger version of Deedee that she represented.

Ron had to leave town on another business trip, and while he was gone she took me to the theatre to see a revival of Stoppard's *Jumpers* and I took her to the racetrack to watch a minor stakes race for fillies. The play was nice enough, a little obscure but well-acted; I don't think she liked the color and excitement of the track any more than Deedee had.

I kept wondering if she could somehow *be* Deedee reincarnated, but I knew deep in my gut that it wasn't possible: if she was Deedee—*my* Deedee—she'd have been put here for me, and this one was marrying a young man named Ron. Besides, she had a past, she had photos of herself as a little girl, friends who had known her for years, and Deedee had only been dead for seven years. And while I didn't understand what was happening, I knew there couldn't have been two of her co-existing at the same time. (No, I never asked myself *why*; I just knew it couldn't be.)

Sometimes, as a bit of an experiment, I'd order a wine, or mention a play or book or movie that I knew Deedee hadn't liked, and invariably Deirdre would wrinkle her nose and express her lack of enthusiasm for the very same thing.

It was uncanny. And in a way it was frightening, because I couldn't understand why it was happening. This wasn't *my* Deedee. Mine had lived her life with me, and that life was over. I was a seventy-six-year-old man with half a dozen ailments who was just beating time on his way to the

grave. I was never going to impose myself on Deirdre, and she was never going to look upon me as anything but an eccentric acquaintance . . . so why had I met her?

From time to time I'd had this romantic fancy that when two people loved each other and suited each other the way Deedee and I did, they'd keep coming back over and over again. Once they'd be Adam and Eve, once they'd be Lancelot and Guinevere, once they'd be Bogart and Bacall. But they'd be *together*. They wouldn't be an old man and a young woman who could never connect. I had half a century's worth of experiences we could never share, I was sure the thought of my touching her would make her skin crawl, and I was long past the point where I could do anything *but* touch her. So whether she was my Deedee reborn, or just *a* Deedee, why were the two of us here at this time and in this place?

I didn't know.

But a few days later I learned that I'd better find out pretty damned quick. Something finally showed up in all the tests I'd been taking at the hospital. They put me on half a dozen new medications, gave me some powerful pain pills for when I needed them, and told me not to make any long-term plans.

Hell, I wasn't even that unhappy about it. At least I'd be with my Deedee again—the *real* Deedee, not the charming substitute.

The next night was our regular dinner date. I'd decided not to tell her the news; there was no sense distressing her.

It turned out that she was distressed enough as it was. Ron had given her an ultimatum: set a date or break it off. (Things had changed a lot since my day. Most of my contemporaries would have killed to have a gorgeous girlfriend who had no problem sleeping with them but got nervous at the thought of marriage.)

"So what are you going to do?" I asked sympathetically.

"I don't know," she replied. "I'm fond of him, I really am. But I just . . . I don't know."

"Let him go," I said.

She stared at me questioningly.

"If you're not certain after all this time," I said, "kiss him off."

She sighed deeply. "He's everything I should want in a husband, Walter. He's thoughtful and considerate, we share a lot of interests, and he's got a fine future as an architect." She smiled ruefully. "I even like his mother."

"But?" I prompted her.

"But I don't think I love him." She stared into my eyes. "I always thought I'd know right away. At least that's the myth I was brought up on as a little girl, and it was reinforced by all the romance novels I read and the movies I saw. How was it for you and your Deedee? Did you ever have any doubts?"

"Never a one," I said. "Not from the first moment to the last."

"I'm thirty-one, Walter," she said unhappily. "If I haven't met the right guy yet, what are the odds he's going to show up before I'm forty, or sixty? What if I want to have a baby? Do I have it with a man I don't love, or with a guy I love who's living six states away before it's even born?" She sighed unhappily. "I have two good friends who married the men of their

dreams. They're both divorced. My closest friend married a nice guy she wasn't sure she loved. She's been happily married for ten years, and keeps telling me I'm crazy if I let Ron get away." She stared across the table at me, a tortured expression on her face. "I'd give everything I have to be as sure of a man—*any* man—as you were of your Deedee."

And *that* was when I knew why I'd met her, and why the medics had given me a few more months atop Planet Earth before I spent the rest of eternity beneath it.

We finished the meal, and for the first time ever, I walked her home. She lived in one of those high-rise apartment buildings, kind of a miniature city in itself. It wasn't fancy enough to have a doorman, but she assured me the security system was state of the art. She kissed me on the cheek while a couple of neighbors who were coming out looked at her as if she were crazy. I waited until she was safely in the elevator, then left and returned home.

When I woke up the next morning I decided it was time to get busy. At least I was going to be in familiar locations where I felt comfortable. I got dressed and went out to the track, spent a few hours in the grandstand near the furlong pole where I always got the best view of the races, and didn't lay a single bet, just hung around. Then, after dinner, I started making the rounds of all my favorite bookstores. I spent the next two afternoons at the zoo and the natural history museum, where I'd spent so many happy afternoons with Deedee, and the one after that at the ballpark in the left field bleachers. I had to take a couple of pain pills along the way, but I didn't let it slow me down. I continued my circuit of bookstores and coffee shops in the evenings.

On the sixth night I decided I was getting tired of Italian food—hell, I was getting tired, period—and I went to the Olympus, another restaurant I've been frequenting for years. It doesn't look like much, no Greek statues, not even any belly dancers or bouzouki players, but it serves the best pastitso and dolmades in town.

And that's where I saw him.

His face didn't jump right out at me the way Deirdre's did, but then I hadn't really looked at it in a long time. He was alone. I waited until he got up to go to the men's room, and then followed him in.

"Nice night," I said, when we were washing our hands.

"If you say so," he answered unenthusiastically.

"The air is clear, the moon is out, there's a lovely breeze, and the possibilities are endless," I said. "What could be better?"

"Look, fella," he said irritably, "I just broke up with my girl and I'm in no mood for talk, okay?"

"I need to ask you a couple of questions, Wally."

"How'd you know my name?" he demanded.

I shrugged. "You look like a Wally."

He cast a quick look at the door. "What the hell's going on? You try anything funny, and I'll—"

"Not to worry," I said. "I'm just a used-up old man trying to do one last good deed on the way to the grave." I pulled an ancient photo out of my wallet and held it up. "Look at all familiar?"

He frowned. "I don't remember posing for that. Did you take it?"

"A friend did. Who's your favorite actor?"

"Humphrey Bogart. Why?" Of course. Bogie had been my favorite since I was a kid.

"Just curious. Last question: what do you think of Agatha Christie?"

"Why?"

"I'm curious."

He stared at me for a moment, then shrugged. "I can't stand her. Murders take place in back alleys, not vicarages." It figured. I'd always hated mystery novels where the murder was committed primarily to provide the detective with a corpse.

"Good answer, Wally."

"What are you smiling about?" he asked suspiciously.

"I'm happy."

"I'm glad one of us is."

"Tell you what," I said. "Maybe I can cheer you up, too. You know a restaurant called Vincenzo's—a little Italian place about three blocks east of here?"

"Yeah, I stop in there every now and then. Why?"

"I want you to be my guest for dinner tomorrow night."

"Still why?"

"I'm an old man with nothing to spend my money on," I said. "Why don't you humor me?"

He considered it, then shrugged. "What the hell. I don't have anyone to eat with anyway."

"Temporarily," I replied.

"What are you talking about?"

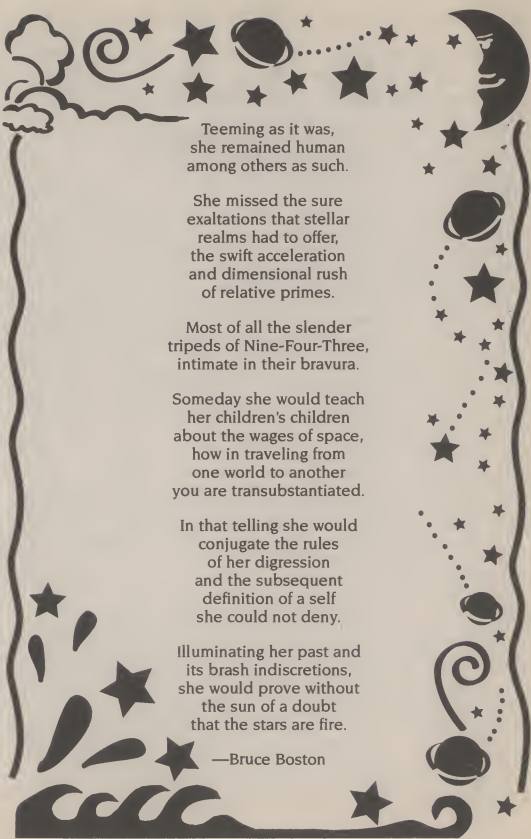
"Just show up," I said. Then, as I walked to the door, I turned back to him and smiled. "Have I got a girl for you!" O

THE DIMENSIONAL RUSH OF RELATIVE PRIMES

When Theda slipped into
a life of leisure
on eleven planets,
she had no idea of
the alien opportunities
she would endure.

At the end of her
journey lay the instant
known as Earth.





Teeming as it was,
she remained human
among others as such.

She missed the sure
exaltations that stellar
realms had to offer,
the swift acceleration
and dimensional rush
of relative primes.

Most of all the slender
tripeds of Nine-Four-Three,
intimate in their bravura.

Someday she would teach
her children's children
about the wages of space,
how in traveling from
one world to another
you are transubstantiated.

In that telling she would
conjugate the rules
of her digression
and the subsequent
definition of a self
she could not deny.

Illuminating her past and
its brash indiscretions,
she would prove without
the sun of a doubt
that the stars are fire.

—Bruce Boston

Focusing on a single gambit can lead to an unsettling . . .

END GAME

Nancy Kress

Allen Dodson was sitting in seventh-grade math class, staring at the back of Peggy Corcoran's head, when he had the insight that changed the world. First his own world and then, eventually, like dominos toppling in predestined rhythm, everybody else's, until nothing could ever be the same again. Although we didn't, of course, know that back then.

The source of the insight was Peggy Corcoran. Allen had sat behind her since third grade (Anderson, Blake, Corcoran, Dodson, DuQuesne . . .) and never thought her remarkable. Nor was she. It was 1982 and Peggy wore a David Bowie T-shirt and straggly brown braids. But now, staring at the back of her mousy hair, Allen suddenly realized that Peggy's head must be a sloppy mess of skittering thoughts and contradictory feelings and half-buried longings—*just as his was*. Nobody was what they seemed to be!

The realization actually made his stomach roil. In books and movies, characters had one thought at a time: "*Elementary, my dear Watson.*" "*An offer he couldn't refuse.*" "*Beam me up, Scotty!*" But Allen's own mind, when he tried to watch it, was different. *Ten more minutes of class I'm hungry gotta pee the answer is $x+6$ you moron what would it be like to kiss Linda Wilson M*A*S*H on tonight really gotta pee locker stuck today Linda eight more minutes do the first sixteen problems baseball after school—*

No. Not even close. He would have to include his mind watching those thoughts and then his thoughts about the watching thoughts and then—
And Peggy Corcoran was doing all that, too.

And Linda Wilson.

And Jeff Gallagher.

And Mr. Henderson, standing at the front of math class.

And everyone in the world, all with thoughts zooming through their heads fast as electricity, thoughts bumping into each other and fighting each other and blotting each other out, a mess inside every mind on the whole Earth, nothing sensible or orderly or predictable. . . . Why, right this minute Mr. Henderson could be thinking terrible things even as he assigned the first sixteen problems on page 145, terrible things about Allen even or Mr. Henderson could be thinking about his lunch or hating teaching or planning a murder. . . . *You could never know.* No one was settled or simple, nothing could be *counted on*. . . .

Allen had to be carried, screaming, from math class.

I didn't learn any of this until decades later, of course. Allen and I weren't friends, even though we sat across the aisle from each other (Ed-

wards, Farr, Fitzgerald, Gallagher...). And after the screaming fit, I thought he was just as weird as everyone else did. I never taunted Allen like some of the boys, or laughed at him like the girls, and a part of me was actually interested in the strange things he sometimes said in class, always looking as if he had no idea how peculiar he sounded. But I wasn't strong enough to go against the herd and make friends with such a loser.

The summer before Allen went off to Harvard, we did become—if not friends—then chess companions. "You play rotten, Jeff," Allen said to me with his characteristic, oblivious candor, "but nobody else plays at all." So two or three times a week we sat on his parents' screened porch and battled it out on the chessboard. I never won. Time after time I slammed out of the house in frustration and shame, vowing not to return. After all, unlike wimpy Allen, I had better things to do with my time: girls, cars, James Bond movies. But I always went back.

Allen's parents were, I thought even back then, a little frightened by their son's intensity. Mild, hard-working people fond of golf, they pretty much left Allen alone from his fifteenth birthday on. As we moved rooks and knights around the chessboard in the gathering darkness of the porch, Allen's mother would timidly offer a pitcher of lemonade and a plate of cookies. She treated both of us with an uneasy respect that, in turn, made me uneasy. That wasn't how parents were supposed to behave.

Harvard was a close thing for Allen, despite his astronomical SATs. His grades were spotty because he only did the work in courses he was interested in, and his medical history was even spottier: bouts of depression when he didn't attend school, two brief hospitalizations in a psychiatric ward. Allen would get absorbed by something—chess, quantum physics, Buddhism—to the point where he couldn't stop, until all at once his interest vanished as if it had never existed. Harvard had, I thought in my eighteen-year-old wisdom, every reason to be wary. But Allen was a National Merit scholar, and when he won the Westinghouse science competition for his work on cranial structures in voles, Harvard took him.

The night before he left, we had our last chess match. Allen opened with the conservative Italian game, which told me he was slightly distracted. Twelve moves in, he suddenly said, "Jeff, what if you could tidy up your thoughts, the way you tidy up your room every night?"

"Do what?" My mother "tidied up" my room, and what kind of weirdo used words like that, anyway?

He ignored me. "It's sort of like static, isn't it? All those stray thoughts in a mind, interfering with a clear broadcast. Yeah, that's the right analogy. Without the static, we could all think clearer. Cleaner. We could see farther before the signal gets lost in uncontrolled noise."

In the gloom of the porch, I could barely see his pale, broad-cheeked face. But I had a sudden insight, rare for me that summer. "Allen—is that what happened to you that time in seventh grade? Too much . . . static?"

"Yeah." He didn't seem embarrassed, unlike anybody normal. It was as if embarrassment was too insignificant for this subject. "That was the first time I saw it. For a long time I thought if I could learn to meditate—you know, like Buddhist monks—I could get rid of the static. But medita-

tion doesn't go far enough. The static is still there, you're just not paying attention to it anymore. But it's still there." He moved his bishop.

"What exactly happened in the seventh grade?" I found myself intensely curious, which I covered by staring at the board and making a move.

He told me, still unembarrassed, in exhaustive detail. Then he added, "It should be possible to adjust brain chemicals to eliminate the static. To unclutter the mind. It should!"

"Well," I said, dropping from insight to my more usual sarcasm, "maybe you'll do it at Harvard, if you don't get sidetracked by some weird shit like ballet or model railroads."

"Checkmate," Allen said.

I lost track of him after that summer, except for the lengthy Bakersville High School Alumni Notes faithfully mailed out every single year by Linda Wilson, who must have had some obsessive/compulsiveness of her own. Allen went on to Harvard Medical School. After graduation he was hired by a prestigious pharmaceutical company and published a lot of scientific articles about topics I couldn't pronounce. He married, divorced, married again, divorced again. Peggy Corcoran, who married my cousin Joe and who knew Allen's second wife, told me at my father's funeral that both ex-wives said the same thing about Allen: He was never emotionally present.

I saw him for myself at our twenty-fifth reunion. He looked surprisingly the same: thin, broad-faced, pale. He stood alone in a corner, looking so pathetic that I dragged Karen over to him. "Hey, Allen. Jeff Gallagher."

"I know."

"This is my wife, Karen."

He smiled at her but said nothing. Karen, both outgoing and compassionate, started a flow of small talk, but Allen shut her off in mid-sentence. "Jeff, you still play chess?"

"Neither Karen nor I play now," I said pointedly.

"Oh. There's someone I want you to see, Jeff. Can you come to the lab tomorrow?"

The "lab" was sixty miles away, in the city, and I had to work the next day. But something about the situation had captured my wife's eclectic and sharply intelligent interest. She said, "What is it, Allen, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I don't mind. It's a chess player. I think she might change the world."

"You mean the big important chess world?" I said. Near Allen, all my teenage sarcasm had returned.

"No. The whole world. Please come, Jeff."

"What time?" Karen said.

"Karen—I have a job."

"Your hours are flexible," she said, which was true. I was a real estate agent, working from home. She smiled at me with all her wicked sparkle.

"I'm sure it will be fascinating."

Lucy Hartwick, twenty-five years old, was tall, slender, and very pretty. I saw Karen, who unfortunately inclined to jealousy, glance at me. But I wasn't attracted to Lucy. There was something cold about her beauty.

She barely glanced up at us from a computer in Allen's lab, and her gaze was indifferent. The screen displayed a chess game.

"Lucy's rating, as measured by computer games anyway, is 2670," Allen said.

"So?" Yes, 2670 was extremely high; only twenty or so players in the world held ratings above 2700. But I was still in sarcastic mode, even as I castigated myself for childishness.

Allen said, "Six months ago her rating was 1400."

"So six months ago, she first learned to play, right?" We were talking about Lucy, bent motionless above the chessboard, as if she weren't even present.

"No, she had played twice a week for five years."

That kind of ratings jump for someone with mediocre talent who hadn't studied chess several hours a day for years—it just didn't happen. Karen said, "Good for you, Lucy!" Lucy glanced up blankly, then returned to her board.

I said, "And so just how is this supposed to change the world?"

"Come see this," Allen said. Without looking back, he strode toward the door.

I was getting tired of his games, but Karen followed him, so I followed her. Eccentricity has always intrigued Karen, perhaps because she's so balanced, so sane, herself. It was one reason I fell in love with her.

Allen held out a mass of graphs, charts, and medical scans as if he expected me to read them. "See, Jeff, these are all Lucy, taken when she's playing chess. The caudate nucleus, which aids the mind in switching gears from one thought to another, shows low activity. So does the thalamus, which processes sensory input. And here, in the—"

"I'm a realtor, Allen," I said, more harshly than I intended. "What does all this garbage *mean*?"

Allen looked at me and said simply, "She's done it. Lucy has. She's learned to eliminate the static."

"What static?" I said, even though I remembered perfectly our conversation of twenty-five years ago.

"You mean," said Karen, always a quick study, "that Lucy can concentrate on one thing at a time without getting distracted?"

"I just said so, didn't I?" Allen said. "Lucy Hartwick has control of her own mind. When she plays chess, that's *all* she's doing. As a result, she's now equal to the top echelons of the chess world."

"But she hasn't actually played any of those top players, has she?" I argued. "This is just your estimate based on her play against some computer."

"Same thing," Allen said.

"It is not!"

"I'm an *Asimov's* veteran. My second published story appeared in the January/February 1978 issue, and the bulk of my short work has appeared in *Asimov's* ever since, including one Hugo- and two Nebula-Award winning stories. I've published with five editors and countless format changes, and I'm still thrilled to be here."

—Nancy Kress

Karen peered in surprise at my outrage. "Jeff—"

Allen said, "Yes, Jeff, listen to Carol. Don't—"

"Karen!"

"—you understand? Lucy's somehow achieved *total* concentration. That lets her just . . . just soar ahead in her understanding of the thing she chooses to focus on. Don't you realize what this could mean for medical research? For . . . for any field at all? We could solve global warming and cancer and toxic waste and . . . and everything!"

As far as I knew, Allen had never been interested in global warming, and a sarcastic reply rose to my lips. But either Allen's face or Karen's hand on my arm stopped me. She said gently, "That could be wonderful, Allen."

"It will be!" he said with all the fervor of his seventh-grade fit. "It will be!"

"What was that all about?" Karen said in the car on our way home.

"Oh, that was just Allen being—"

"Not Allen. You."

"Me?" I said, but even I knew my innocence didn't ring true.

"I've never seen you like that. You positively sneered at him, and for what might actually be an enormous breakthrough in brain chemistry."

"It's just a theory, Karen! Ninety percent of theories collapse as soon as anyone runs controlled experiments."

"But you, Jeff . . . you *want* this one to collapse."

I twisted in the driver's seat to look at her face. Karen stared straight ahead, her pretty lips set as concrete. My first instinct was to bluster . . . but not with Karen.

"I don't know," I said quietly. "Allen has always brought out the worst in me, for some reason. Maybe . . . maybe I'm jealous."

A long pause, while I concentrated as hard as I could on the road ahead. Yellow divider, do not pass, thirty-five MPH, pothole ahead...

Then Karen's hand rested lightly on my shoulder, and the world was all right again.

After that I kept in sporadic touch with Allen. Two or three times I phoned and we talked for fifteen minutes. Or, rather, Allen talked and I listened, struggling with irritability. He never asked about me or Karen. He talked exclusively about his research into various aspects of Lucy Hartwick: her spinal and cranial fluid, her neural firing patterns, her blood and tissue cultures. He spoke of her as if she were no more than a collection of biological puzzles he was determined to solve, and I couldn't imagine what their day-to-day interactions were like. For some reason I didn't understand, I didn't tell Karen about these conversations.

That was the first year. The following June, things changed. Allen's reports—because that's what they were, reports and not conversations—became non-stop complaints.

"The FDA is taking forever to pass my IND application. Forever!"

I figured out that "IND" meant "initial new drug," and that it must be a green light for his Lucy research.

"And Lucy has become impossible. She's hardly ever available when I

need her, trotting off to chess tournaments around the world. As if chess mattered as much as my work on her!"

I remembered the long-ago summer when chess mattered to Allen himself more than anything else in the world.

"I'm just frustrated by the selfishness and the bureaucracy and the politics."

"Yes," I said.

"And doesn't Lucy understand how important this could be? The incredible potential for improving the world?"

"Evidently not," I said, with mean satisfaction that I disliked myself for. To compensate I said, "Allen, why don't you take a break and come out here for dinner some night. Doesn't a break help with scientific thinking? Lead sometimes to real insights?"

I could feel, even over the phone line, that he'd been on the point of refusal, but my last two sentences stopped him. After a moment he said, "Oh, all right, if you want me to," so ungraciously that it seemed he was granting me an inconvenient favor. Right then, I knew that the dinner was going to be a disaster.

And it was, but not as much as it would have been without Karen. She didn't take offense when Allen refused to tour her beloved garden. She said nothing when he tasted things and put them down on the tablecloth, dropped bits of food as he chewed, slobbered on the rim of his glass. She listened patiently to Allen's two-hour monologue, nodding and making encouraging little noises. Toward the end her eyes did glaze a bit, but she never lost her poise and wouldn't let me lose mine, either.

"It's a disgrace," Allen ranted, "the FDA is hobbling all productive research with excessive caution for—do you know what would happen if Jenner had needed FDA approval for his vaccines? We'd all still have smallpox, that's what! If Louis Pasteur—"

"Why don't you play chess with Jeff?" Karen said when the meal finally finished. "While I clear away here."

I exhaled in relief. Chess was played in silence. Moreover, Karen would be stuck with cleaning up after Allen's appalling table manners.

"I'm not interested in chess anymore," Allen said. "Anyway, I have to get back to the lab. Not that Lucy kept her appointment for tests on . . . she's wasting my time in Turkistan or someplace. Bye. Thanks for dinner."

"Don't invite him again, Jeff," Lucy said to me after Allen left. "Please."

"I won't. You were great, sweetheart."

Later, in bed, I did that thing she likes and I don't, by way of saying thank you. Halfway through, however, Karen pushed me away. "I only like it when you're really *here*," she said. "Tonight you're just not focusing on us at all."

After she went to sleep, I crept out of bed and turned on the computer in my study. The heavy fragrance of Karen's roses drifted through the window screen. Lucy Hartwick was in Turkmenistan, playing in the Chess Olympiad in Ashgabat. Various websites told of her rocketing rise to the top of the chess world. Articles about her all mentioned that she never socialized with her own or any other team, preferred to eat all her meals alone in her hotel room, and never smiled. I studied the accompanying pictures, trying to see what had happened to Lucy's beauty.

She was still slender and long-legged. The lovely features were still there, although obscured by her habitual pose while studying a chessboard: hunched over from the neck like a turtle, with two fingers in her slightly open mouth. I had seen that pose somewhere before, but I couldn't remember where. It wasn't appealing, but the loss of Lucy's good looks came from something else. Even for a chess player, the concentration on her face was formidable. It wiped out any hint of any other emotion whatsoever. Good poker players do that, too, but not in quite that way. Lucy looked not quite human.

Or maybe I just thought that because of my complicated feelings about Allen.

At two A.M. I sneaked back into bed, glad that Karen hadn't woken while I was gone.

"She's gone!" Allen cried over the phone, a year later. "She's just gone!"

"Who?" I said, although, of course, I knew. "Allen, I can't talk now, I have a client coming into the office two minutes from now."

"You have to come down here!"

"Why?" I had ducked all of Allen's calls ever since that awful dinner, changing my home phone to an unlisted number and letting my secretary turn him away at work. I'd only answered now because I was expecting a call from Karen about the time for our next marriage counseling session. Things weren't as good as they used to be. Not really bad, just clouds blocking what had been a steady marital sunshine. I wanted to dispel those clouds before they turned into major thunderstorms.

"You have to come," Allen repeated, and he started to sob.

Embarrassed, I held the phone away from my ear. Grown men didn't cry like that, not to other men. All at once I realized why Allen wanted me to come to the lab: because he had no other human contact at all.

"Please, Jeff," Allen whispered, and I snapped, "Okay!"

"Mr. Gallagher, your clients are here," Brittany said at the doorway, and I tried to compose a smile and a good lie.

And after all that, Lucy Hartwick wasn't even gone. She sat in Allen's lab, hunched over a chessboard with two fingers in her mouth, just as I had seen her a year ago on the Web.

"What the hell—Allen, you *said*—"

Unpredictable as ever, he had calmed down since calling me. Now he handed me a sheaf of print-outs and medical photos. I flashed back suddenly to the first time I'd come to this lab, when Allen had also thrust on me documents I couldn't read. He just didn't learn.

"Her white matter has shrunk another 75 percent since I saw her last," Allen said, as though that were supposed to convey something to me.

"You said Lucy was gone!"

"She is."

"She's sitting right there!"

Allen looked at me. I had the impression that the simple act required enormous effort on his part, like a man trying to drag himself free of a concrete block to which he was chained. He said, "I was always jealous of you, you know."

It staggered me. My mouth opened but Allen had already moved back to the concrete block. "Just look at these brain scans, 75 percent less white matter in six months! And these neurotransmitter levels, they—"

"Allen," I said. Sudden cold had seized my heart. "Stop." But he babbled on about the caudate nucleus and antibodies attacking the basal ganglia and bi-directional rerouting.

I walked over to Lucy and lifted her chessboard off the table.

Immediately she rose and continued playing variations on the board in my arms. I took several steps backward; she followed me, still playing. I hurled the board into the hall, slammed the door, and stood with my back to it. I was six-one and 190 pounds; Lucy wasn't even half that. In fact, she appeared to have lost weight, so that her slimness had turned gaunt.

She didn't try to fight me. Instead she returned to her table, sat down, and stuck two fingers in her mouth.

"She's playing in her head, isn't she," I said to Allen.

"Yes."

"What does 'white matter' do?"

"It contains axons that connect neurons in the cerebral cortex to neurons in other parts of the brain, thereby facilitating intercranial communication." Allen sounded like a textbook.

"You mean, it lets some parts of the brain talk to other parts?"

"Well, that's only a crude analogy, but—"

"It lets different thoughts from different parts of the brain reach each other," I said, still staring at Lucy. "It makes you aware of more than one thought at a time."

Static.

Allen began a long technical explanation, but I wasn't listening. I remembered now where I'd seen that pose of Lucy's, head pushed forward and two fingers in her mouth, drooling. It had been in an artist's rendering of Queen Elizabeth I in her final days, immobile and unreachable, her mind already gone in advance of her dying body.

"*Lucy's gone*," Allen had said. He knew.

"Allen, what baseball team did Babe Ruth play for?"

He babbled on about neurotransmitters.

"What was Bobby Fischer's favorite opening move?" Silently I begged him, *Say e4, damn it.*

He talked about the brain waves of concentrated meditation.

"Did you know that a tsunami will hit Manhattan tomorrow?"

He urged overhaul of FDA clinical-trial design.

I said, as quietly as I could manage, "You have it, too, don't you. You injected yourself with whatever concoction the FDA wouldn't approve, or you took it as a pill, or something. You wanted Lucy's static-free state, like some fucking *dryer sheet*, and so you gave this to yourself from her. And now neither one of you can switch focus at all." The call to me had been Allen's last, desperate foray out of his perfect concentration on this project. No—that hadn't been the last.

I took him firmly by the shoulders. "Allen, what did you mean when you said 'I was always jealous of you'?"

He blathered on about MRI results.

"Allen—please tell me what you meant!"

But he couldn't. And now I would never know.

I called the front desk of the research building. I called 911. Then I called Karen, needing to hear her voice, needing to connect with her. But she didn't answer her cell, and the office said she'd left her desk to go home early.

Both Allen and Lucy were hospitalized briefly, then released. I never heard the diagnosis, although I suspect it involved an "inability to perceive and relate to social interactions" or some such psychobabble. Doesn't play well with others. Runs with scissors. Lucy and Allen demonstrated they could physically care for themselves by doing it, so the hospital let them go. Business professionals, I hear, mind their money for them, order their physical lives. Allen has just published another brilliant paper, and Lucy Hartwick is the first female World Chess Champion.

Karen said, "They're happy, in their own way. If their single-minded focus on their passions makes them oblivious to anything else—well, so what. Maybe that's the price for genius."

"Maybe," I said, glad that she was talking to me at all. There hadn't been much conversation lately. Karen had refused any more marriage counseling and had turned silent, escaping me by working in the garden. Our roses are the envy of the neighborhood. We have Tuscan Sun, Ruffled Cloud, Mister Lincoln, Crown Princess, Golden Zest. English roses, hybrid teas, floribunda, groundcover roses, climbers, shrubs. They glow scarlet, pink, antique apricot, deep gold, delicate coral. Their combined scent nauseates me.

I remember the exact moment that happened. We were in the garden, Karen kneeling beside a flower bed, a wide hat shading her face from the sun so that I couldn't see her eyes.

"Karen," I said, trying to mask my desperation, "Do you still love me?"

"Hand me that trowel, will you, Jeff?"

"Karen! Please! Can we talk about what's happening to us?"

"The Tahitian Sunsets are going to be glorious this year."

I stared at her, at the beads of sweat on her upper lip, the graceful arc of her neck, her happy smile.

Karen clearing away Allen's dinner dishes, picking up his sloppily dropped food. Lucy with two fingers in her mouth, studying her chessboard and then touching the pieces.

No. Not possible.

Karen reached for the trowel herself, as if she'd forgotten I was there.

Lucy Hartwick lost her championship to a Russian named Dmitri Chertov. A geneticist at Stanford made a breakthrough in cancer research so important that it grabbed all headlines for nearly a week. By a coincidence that amused the media, his young daughter won the Scripps Spelling Bee. I looked up the geneticist on the Internet; a year ago he'd attended a scientific conference with Allen. A woman in Oregon, some New Age type, developed the ability to completely control her brain waves through profound meditation. Her husband is a chess grandmaster.

I walk a lot now, when I'm not cleaning or cooking or shopping. Karen quit her job; she barely leaves the garden even to sleep. I kept my job, although I take fewer clients. As I walk, I think about the ones I do have, mulling over various houses they might like. I watch the August trees begin to tinge with early yellow, ponder overheard snatches of conversation, talk to dogs. My walks get longer and longer, and I notice that I've started to time my speed, to become interested in running shoes, to investigate transcontinental walking routes.

But I try not to think about walking too much. I observe children at frenetic play during the last of their summer vacation, recall movies I once liked, wonder at the intricacies of quantum physics, anticipate what I'll cook for lunch. Sometimes I sing. I recite the few snatches of poetry I learned as a child, relive great football games, chat with old ladies on their porches, add up how many calories I had for breakfast. Sometimes I even mentally rehearse basic chess openings: the Vienna Game or the Petroff Defense. I let whatever thoughts come that will, accepting them all.

Listening to the static, because I don't know how much longer I've got. ○

LEAVING FOR THE MALL

"Can I borrow the ship, Daddy?"

The "smart key" arches

In perfect trajectory

Into her waiting hand

And in his mind

He sees her

Blasting off, huge fins

And red flames

Of exhaust ...

She laughs

At his old fashioned

Rockets with

Primitive fuels ...

Her old man is so funny;

And catching the key,

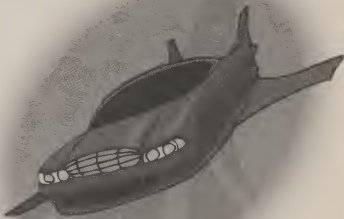
She's ready to go,

Already gone

Leaving no trail behind

For him to watch

Or follow.



—Roger Dutcher

ALWAYS

Karen Joy Fowler

Karen Joy Fowler is the author of four novels and two short story collections. Her first novel, *Sarah Canary*, won the Commonwealth Award for best first novel by a Californian, *Sister Noon* was a Pen/Faulkner finalist, and *The Jane Austen Book Club*, a New York Times bestseller. She won the World Fantasy award for her collection *Black Glass* and the Nebula for her short story "What I Didn't See." From 1985 to 1997, we published nine of her perceptive short stories. While it's taken ten years to get her tenth, we hope it won't be so long before we see another one.

How I Got Here:

I was seventeen years old when I heard the good news from Wilt Loomis who had it straight from Brother Porter himself. Wilt was so excited he was ready to drive to the city of Always that very night. Back then I just wanted to be anywhere Wilt was. So we packed up.

Always had two openings and these were going for five thousand apiece, but Wilt had already talked to Brother Porter who said, seeing as it was Wilt, who was good with cars, he'd take twenty-five hundred down and give us another three years to come up with the other twenty-five, and let that money cover us both. You average that five thousand, Wilt told me, over the infinite length of your life and it worked out to almost nothing a year. Not exactly nothing, but as close to nothing as you could get without getting to nothing. It was too good a deal to pass up. They were practically paying us.

My stepfather was drinking again and it looked less and less like I was going to graduate high school. Mother was just as glad to have me out of the house and harm's way. She did give me some advice. You can always tell a cult from a religion, she said, because a cult is just a set of rules that lets certain men get laid.

And then she told me not to get pregnant, which I could have taken as a shot across the bow, her new way of saying her life would have been so much better without me, but I chose not to. Already I was taking the long view.

The city of Always was a lively place then—this was back in 1938—part

commune and part roadside attraction, set down in the Santa Cruz mountains with the redwoods all around. It used to rain all winter and be damp all summer, too. Slug weather for those big yellow slugs you never saw anywhere but Santa Cruz. Out in the woods it smelled like bay leaves.

The old Santa Cruz Highway snaked through and the two blocks right on the road were the part open to the public. People would stop there for a soda—Brother Porter used to brag that he'd invented Hawaiian Punch, though the recipe had been stolen by some gang in Fresno who took the credit for it—and to look us over, whisper about us on their way to the beach. We offered penny peep shows for the adults, because Brother Porter said you ought to know what sin was before you abjured it, and a row of wooden Santa Claus statues for the kids. In our heyday we had fourteen gas pumps to take care of all the gawkers.

Brother Porter founded Always in the early twenties, and most of the other residents were already old when I arrived. That made sense, I guess, that they'd be the ones to feel the urgency, but I didn't expect it and I wasn't pleased. Wilt was twenty-five when we first went to Always. Of course, that too seemed old to me then.

The bed I got had just been vacated by a thirty-two-year-old woman named Maddie Beckinger. Maddie was real pretty. She'd just filed a suit against Brother Porter alleging that he'd promised to star her in a movie called *The Perfect Woman*, and when it opened she was supposed to fly to Rome in a replica of *The Spirit of St. Louis*, only this plane would be called *The Spirit of Love*. She said in her suit that she'd always been more interested in being a movie star than in living forever. Who, she asked, was more immortal than Marlene Dietrich? Brother Porter hated it when we got dragged into the courts, but, as I was to learn, it did keep happening. Lawyers are forever, Brother Porter used to say.

He'd gotten as far as building a sound stage for the movie, which he hoped he might be able to rent out from time to time, and Smitty LeRoy and the Watsonville Wranglers recorded there, but mainly we used it as a dormitory.

Maddie's case went on for two whole years. During this time she came by occasionally to pick up her mail and tell us all she'd never seen such a collection of suckers as we were. Then one day we heard she'd been picked up in Nevada for passing bad checks, which turned out not to be her first offense. So off she went to the San Quentin instead of to Rome. It seemed like a parable to me, but Brother Porter wasn't the sort who resorted to parables.

Lots of the residents had come in twos like Wilt and me, like animals to the ark, only to learn that there was a men's dormitory and a women's, with Brother Porter living up the hill in his own big house, all by himself and closer to the women's dorm than to the men's. Brother Porter told us right after we got there (though not a second before) that even the married couples weren't to sleep together.

There you go, Mother, was my first thought. Not a cult. Only later it was clarified to me that I *would* be having sex with Brother Porter and so, not a religion, after all.

Frankie Frye and Eleanor Pillser were the ones who told me. I'd been there just about a week and, then, one morning, while we were straight-

ening up our cots and brushing our teeth and what not, they just came right out with it. At dinner the night before there'd been a card by my plate, the queen of hearts, which was Brother Porter's signal, only I didn't know that so I didn't go.

Frankie Frye, yes, that Frankie Frye, I'll get to all that, had the cot on one side of me and Eleanor the cot on the other. The dormitory was as dim in the morning as at night on account of also being a sound stage and having no windows. There was just one light dangling from the ceiling, with a chain that didn't reach down far enough so about a foot of string had been added to it. "The thing the men don't get," Frankie said to me, snapping her pillowcase smooth, "The thing the men mustn't get," Eleanor added on, "is that sleeping with Brother Porter is no hardship," said Frankie.

Frankie was thirty-five then and the postmistress. Eleanor was in her early forties and had come to Always with her husband Rog. I can't tell you how old Brother Porter was, because he always said he wouldn't give an irrelevant number the power of being spoken out loud. He was a fine-looking man though. A man in his prime.

Wilt and I had done nothing but dry runs so far and he'd brought me to Always and paid my way into eternity with certain expectations. He was a fine-looking man, too, and I won't say I wasn't disappointed, just that I took the news better than he did. "I can't lie to you," he told me in those few days after he learned he wouldn't be having sex, but before he learned that I would be. "This is not the way I pictured it. I sort of thought with all that extra time, I'd get to be with more people, not less."

And when he did hear about me and Brother Porter, he pointed out that the rest of the world only had to be faithful until death did them part. "I don't care how good he is," Wilt said. "You won't want to be with him and no one else forever." Which I suspected he would turn out to be right about and he was. But in those early days, Brother Porter could make my pulse dance like a snake in a basket. In those early days, Brother Porter never failed to bring the goods.

We had a lot of tourists back then, especially in the summer. They would sidle up to us in their beach gear, ten cent barbecue in one hand and skepticism in the other, to ask how we could really be sure Brother Porter had made us immortal. At first I tried to explain that it took two things to be immortal: it took Brother Porter and it took faith in Brother Porter. If I started asking the question, then I was already missing one of the two things it took.

But this in no way ended the matter. You think about hearing the same question a couple hundred times, and then add to that the knowledge that you'll be hearing it forever, because the way some people see it, you could be two hundred and five and then suddenly die when you're two hundred and six. The world is full of people who couldn't be convinced of cold in a snowstorm.

I was made the Always zookeeper. We had a petting zoo, three goats, one llama, a parrot named Parody, a dog named Chowder, and a monkey named Monkeyshines, but Monkeyshines bit and couldn't be let loose among the tourists no matter how much simple pleasure it would have given me to do so.

We immortals didn't leave Always much. We didn't have to; we grew our own food, had our own laundry, tailor, barber (though the lousy haircuts figured prominently in Maddie's suit), and someone to fix our shoes. At first, Brother

Porter discouraged field trips, and then later we just found we had less and less in common with people who were going to die. When I complained about how old everyone else at Always was, Wilt pointed out that I was actually closer in age to some seventy-year-old who, like me, was going to live forever, than to some eighteen-year-old with only fifty or so years left. Wilt was as good with numbers as he was with cars and he was as right about that as everything else. Though some might go and others with five thousand to slap down might arrive, we were a tight community then, and I felt as comfortable in Always as I'd felt anywhere.

The Starkes were the first I ever saw leave. They were a married couple in their mid-forties. (Evelyn Barton and Harry Capps were in their forties, too. Rog and Eleanor, as I've said. Frankie a bit younger. The rest, and there were about thirty of us all told, were too old to guess at, in my opinion.)

The Starkes had managed our radio station, KFQU (which looks nasty, but was really just sequential) until the FRC shut us down, claiming we deviated from our frequency. No one outside Always wanted to hear Brother Porter sermonizing, because no one outside Always thought life was long enough.

The Starkes quit on eternity when Brother Porter took their silver Packard and crashed it on the fishhook turn just outside Los Gatos. Bill Starkes loved that Packard and, even though Brother Porter walked away with hardly a scratch, something about the accident made Bill lose his faith. For someone with all the time in the world, he told us while he waited for his wife to fetch her things, Brother Porter surely does drive fast. (In his defense, Brother Porter did tell the police he wasn't speeding and he stuck to that. He was just in the wrong lane, he said, for the direction in which he was driving.) (He later said that the Starkes hadn't quit over the crash, after all. They'd been planted as fifth columnists in Always and left because we were all such patriots, they saw there was no point to it. Or else they were about to be exposed. I forget which.)

The next to go were Joseph Fitton and Cleveland March. The men just woke up one morning to find Joe and Cleveland's cots stripped bare and Cleveland's cactus missing from the windowsill, without a word said, but Wilt told me they'd been caught doing something they didn't think was sex, but Brother Porter did.

I couldn't see leaving myself. The thing I'd already learned was that when you remove death from your life, you change everything that's left. Take the petting zoo. Parrots are pretty long-lived compared to dogs and goats, but even they die. I'd been there less than two years when Chowder, our little foxhound, had to be put down because his kidneys failed. He wasn't the first dog I'd ever lost; he was just the first I'd lost since I wasn't

I've followed *Asimov's* through three outstanding editors, and wish the magazine well for the next thirty years.

—Karen Joy Fowler

dying myself. I saw my life stretching forward, all counted out in dead dogs, and I saw I couldn't manage that.

I saw that my pets from now on would have to be turtles or trees or nothing. Turtles and trees don't engage the way dogs do, but you can only have your heart broken so many times until it just won't mend again. I sat with Chowder and pulled him into my lap as he died and I was crying so hard for all the Chowder-less years ahead that I understood then and there that immortality was going to bring a certain coldness, a remoteness into my life. I hadn't expected that, but I didn't see a way out of it.

Here's another thing that changes: your investment strategies. As Wilt would say, we were all about T-bills now. Wilt said that often. I got real tired of Wilt saying that.

How It Went On:

Time passed and I felt pretty good about my situation. No one at Always died, and this was a powerful persuasion given how very old some of them were. Not that I needed persuading. I wasn't the youngest woman anymore, that was Kitty Strauss, and I didn't get the queen of hearts so often, but that was okay with me. Only the parrot was left from the petting zoo, so you couldn't really call it a zoo now, and I didn't see as much of the tourists and that was okay with me, too.

Three years in, Wilt had decided he'd gone for immortality prematurely. It had occurred to him that the older residents lived their full lives first, and only arrived in Always when they were tired of the flesh. Not that he wanted to wait as long as some. Winnifred spent every meal detailing the sufferings her arthritis caused her, as if we women weren't already listening to her toss and turn and hack and snore all night long.

Also, he hadn't managed to scrape up the second twenty-five hundred dollars we owed and it wasn't likely he would, since Brother Porter collected all our paychecks as a matter of course.

So Wilt told me that he wouldn't ante up again for eternity until he'd slept with at least twenty-five women, but no sooner did he move into San Jose than he was on his way to the Pacific Theater as a mechanic on the *USS Aquarius*. For awhile I got postcards from the Gilberts, Marshalls, Marianas, and Carolines. It would have been a real good time for Wilt to be immortal, but if he was thinking that too, he never said it.

In fact, the postcards didn't say much of anything. Maybe this was navy policy or maybe Wilt remembered that Brother Porter vetted all our mail first. Whichever, Brother Porter handed Wilt's postcards to me without comment, but he read Mother's letters aloud in the dining hall after dinner, especially if someone was in the hospital and not expected to recover or was cheating on her husband or her ration card. I listened just like everyone else, only mildly interested, as if these weren't mostly people I'd once known.

Brother Porter said Mother's letters were almost as good as the *Captain Midnight* radio show, which I guess meant that up in the big house, he had a radio and listened to it. Lots of Mother's friends were being neglected by their children. You might say this was a theme. No one ever needed a secret decoder ring to figure Mother out.

It didn't seem to me that the war lasted all that long, though Wilt felt otherwise. When he got back, I'd meet him from time to time in San Jose

and we'd have a drink. The city of Always was dry, except for once when a bunch of reporters in the Fill Your Hole club rented out our dining space, invited us to join them, and spiked the punch so as to get a story from it. It ended in a lot of singing and Winnifred Allington fell off Brother Porter's porch, and Jeb Porter, Brother Porter's teenage son, punched out Harry Capps as a refutation of positive thinking, but the reporters had left by then so they missed it all.

Anyway Brother Porter never explicitly made abstention a condition and I never asked him about it in case he would. I still got my age checked whenever we went to a bar, so that was good. It renewed my faith every time it happened. Not that my faith needed renewing.

Now that Wilt was dying again, our interests had diverged. He was caught up in politics, local corruptions, national scandals. He read the newspapers. He belonged to the auto mechanics' union and he told me he didn't care that the war had ended so much as I might think. The dead were still dead and he'd seen way too many of them. He said that war served the purposes of corporations and politicians so exactly that there would always be another one, and then another, until the day some president or prime minister figured out how to declare a war that lasted forever. He said he hoped he'd die before that day came. I wonder sometimes if that worked out for him.

Once while he was still at Always, Wilt took me to the ocean so that we could stand on the edge and imagine eternity. Now when Wilt talked politics, I'd fill my ears with the sound of the ocean instead. Corporate puppet masters and congressional witch-hunts and union payola—they all drowned together in the pounding of the sea.

Still I went out with Wilt every time he asked. Mostly this was gratitude because he'd bought me eternity. Love had gone the way of the petting zoo for me. Sex was a good thing and there were plenty of times I couldn't sleep for wanting it. But even if sleeping with Wilt wouldn't have cost my life, I wouldn't have. *There was a match found for me at last. I fell in love with a shrub oak*, I read once in high school in a book about Thoreau, who died more than a hundred years ago and left that shrub oak a grieving widow.

When I first came to Always, there were six Erle Stanley Gardner mysteries in the women's dormitory that used to belong to Maddie. I read them all several times. But I wasn't reading anymore and certainly not murder mysteries. I'd even stopped liking music. I'd always supposed that art was about beauty and that beauty was forever. Now I saw that that music was all about time. You take a photograph and it's all about that moment and how that moment will never come again. You go into a library and every book on the shelves is all about death, even the ones pretending to be about birth or rebirth or resurrection or reincarnation.

Only the natural world is rendered eternal. Always was surrounded by the Santa Cruz Mountains, which meant tree trunks across streams, ghostly bear prints deep inside the forest, wild berries, tumbles of rocks, mosses, earthquakes and storms. Out behind the post office was a glade where Brother Porter gave his sermons, had sex, and renewed our lifespans. It was one of those rings of redwoods made when the primary tree in the center dies. Brother Porter had us brick a wall in a half circle behind the trees so it would be more churchlike and the trees grew straight

as candles; you could follow along their trunks all the way to the stars. The first time Brother Porter took me there and I lay smelling the loam and the bay (and also Brother Porter) and looking up, I thought to myself that no matter how long I lived, this place would always be beautiful to me.

I talked less and less. At first, my brain tried to make up the loss, dredging up random flashes from my past—advertising slogans, old songs, glimpses of shoes I'd worn, my mother's jewelry, the taste of an ant I'd once eaten. A dream I'd had in which I was surrounded by food that was bigger than me, bread slices the size of mattresses, which seems like it should have been a good dream, but it wasn't. Memories fast and scattershot. It pleased me to think my last experience of mortality would be a toothpaste commercial. Good-bye to all that.

Then I smoothed out and days would go by when it seemed I hardly thought at all. Tree time.

So it wasn't just Wilt, I was finding it harder to relate to people in general, and, no, this is not a complaint. I never minded having so little in common with those outside Always and their revved-up, streaming-by lives.

While inside Always, I already knew what everyone was going to say.

1) Winnifred was going to complain about her arthritis.

2) John was going to tell us that we were in for a cold winter. He'd make it sound like he was just reading the signs, like he had all this *lore*, the fuzzy caterpillars coming early or being especially fuzzy or some such thing. He was going to remind us that he hadn't always lived in California so he knew what a cold winter really was. He was going to say that Californians didn't know cold weather from their asses.

3) Frankie was going to say that it wasn't her job to tape our mail shut for us and she wasn't doing it anymore, we needed to bring it already taped.

4) Anna was going to complain that her children wouldn't talk to her just because she'd spent their inheritance on immortality. That their refusal to be happy for her was evidence that they'd never loved her.

5) Harry was going to tell us to let a smile be our umbrella.

6) Brother Porter was going to wonder why the arcade wasn't bringing in more money. He was going to add that he wasn't accusing any of us of pocketing, but that it did make you wonder how all those tourists could stop and spend so little money.

7) Kitty was going to tell us how many boys in the arcade had come onto her that day. Her personal best was seventeen. She would make this sound like a problem.

8) Harry would tell us to use those lemons and make lemonade.

9) Vincent was going to say that he thought his watch was fast and make everyone else still wearing a watch tell him what time they had. The fact that the times would vary minutely never ceased to interest him and was good for at least another hour of conversation.

10) Frankie was going to say that no one ever listened to her.

It was a kind of conversation that required nothing in response. On and on it rolled, like the ocean.

Wilt always made me laugh and that never changed either, only it took me so much longer to get the joke. Sometimes I'd be back at Always before I noticed how witty he'd been.

What Happened Next:

Here's the part you already know. One day one spring—one day when the Canada geese were passing overhead yet again, and we were out at the arcades, taking money from tourists, and I was thrilling for the umpteenth time to the sight of the migration, the chevron, the honking, the sense of a wild, wild spirit in the air—Brother Porter took Kitty out to the cathedral ring and he died there.

At first Kitty thought she'd killed him by making the sex so exciting, though anyone else would have been tipped off by the frothing and the screaming. The police came and they shermanned their way through Always. Eventually they found a plastic bag of rat poison stuffed inside one of the unused post office boxes and a half drunk cup of Hawaiian Punch on the mail scale that tested positive for it.

Inside Always, we all got why it wasn't murder. Frankie Frye reminded us that she had no way of suspecting it would kill him. She was so worked up and righteous, she made the rest of us feel we hadn't ever had the same faith in Brother Porter she'd had or we would have poisoned him ourselves years ago.

But no one outside of Always could see this. Frankie's lawyers refused to plead it out that way; they went with insanity and made all the inner workings of Always part of their case. They dredged up the old string of arsons as if they were relevant, as if they hadn't stopped entirely the day Brother Porter finally threw his son out on his ear. Jeb was a witness for the prosecution and a more angelic face you never saw. In retrospect, it was a great mistake to have given immortality to a fourteen-year-old boy. When he had it, he was a jerk, and I could plainly see that not having it had only made him an older jerk.

Frankie's own lawyers made such a point of her obesity that they reduced her to tears. It was a shameful performance and showed how little they understood us. If Frankie ever wished to lose weight, she had all the time in the world to do so. There was nothing relevant or even interesting in her weight.

The difficult issue for the defense was whether Frankie was insane all by herself or along with all the rest of us. Sometimes they seemed to be arguing the one and sometimes the other, so when they chose not to call me to the stand I didn't know if this was because I'd make us all look more crazy or less so. Kitty testified nicely. She charmed them all and the press dubbed her the Queen of Hearts at her own suggestion.

Wilt was able to sell his three years among the immortals to a magazine and recoup every cent of that twenty-five hundred he put up for me. There wasn't much I was happy about right then, but I was happy about that. I didn't even blame him for the way I came off in the article. I expect coquettish was the least I deserved. I'd long ago stopped noticing how I was behaving at any given moment.

I would have thought the trial would be just Mother's cup of tea, even without me on the witness stand, so I was surprised not to hear from her. It made me stop and think back, try to remember when her last letter had come. Could have been five years, could have been ten. Could have been twenty, could have been two. I figured she must be dead, which was

bound to happen sooner or later, though I did think she was young to go, but that might only have been because I'd lost track of how old she was. I never heard from her again so I think I had it right. I wonder if it was the cigarettes. She always said that smoking killed germs.

Not one of the immortals left Always during the trial. Partly we were in shock and huddled up as a result. Partly there was so much to be done, so much money to be made.

The arcade crawled with tourists and reporters, too. Looking for a story, but also, as always, trying to make one. "Now that Brother Porter is dead," they would ask, exact wording to change, but point always the same, "don't you have some doubts? And if you have some doubts, well, then, isn't the game already over?" They were tiresome, but they paid for their Hawaiian punch just like everyone else and we all knew Brother Porter wouldn't have wanted them kept away.

Frankie was let off by reason of insanity. Exactly two days later Harry Capps walked into breakfast just when Winnifred Allington was telling us how badly she'd slept the night before on account of her arthritis. By the time he ran out of bullets, four more immortals were dead.

Harry's defense was no defense. "Not one of them ever got a good night's sleep," he said. "Someone had to show them what a good night's sleep was."

The politicians blamed the overly-lenient Frankie Frye verdict for the four new deaths and swore the same mistake would not be made twice. Harry got life.

Why I'm Still Here:

Everyone else either died or left and now I'm the whole of it. The last of the immortals; City of Always, population one. I moved up to the big house and I'm the postmistress now, along with anything else I care to keep going. I get a salary from the government with benefits and a pension they'll regret if I live forever. They have a powerful faith I won't.

The arcade is closed except for the peep shows, which cost a quarter now and don't need me to do anything to run them but collect the coins after. People don't come through so much since they built the 17, but I still get customers from time to time. They buy a postcard and they want the Always postmark on it.

Wilt came to fetch me after the noise died down. "I brought you here," he said. "Seems like I should take you away." He never did understand why I wouldn't leave. He hadn't lived here long enough to understand it.

I tried the easy answer first. I got shot by Harry Capps, I said. Right through the heart. Was supposed to die. Didn't.

But then I tried again, because that wasn't the real answer and if I'd ever loved anyone, I'd loved Wilt. Who'll take care of the redwoods if I go? I asked him. Who'll take care of the mountains? He still didn't get it, though he said he did. I wouldn't have known how to leave even if I'd wanted to. What I was and what he was—they weren't the same thing at all anymore. There was no way back to what I'd been. The actual living forever part? That was always, always the least of it.

Which is the last thing I'm going to say on the subject. There is no question you can ask I haven't already answered and answered and answered again. Time without end. ○

ALTERNATE ASTROLOGY

Le Verrier would have named
His planet for himself
The Glassmaker's planet
Sand transformed
To transparency
Focusing the light of stars
Over the Milky Way.

Under alternate skies
Heavens not our own
Astrologers forecast:
The brittle planet
Rising to a cusp
Foredooms a crisis
Unless the ever unpredictable
Tombaugh's X
Planet of mystery
Should countervail.

Industrious Farmer George
Herschel's agrarian planet
Is good to plant by.

—Ruth Berman

[Herschel, patriotically, wanted to name the planet he had discovered the Georgian Star, after King George III. Other astronomers complained, as they did also over Le Verrier's choice. These planets became known as Uranus and Neptune, instead. Tombaugh's X became known as Pluto. The name "george" comes from georgos, the Greek for "farmer."]



FIFTH DAY

Jack McDevitt

Jack McDevitt recently won the Southeastern Science Fiction Achievement (SESFA) Awards for best novel, *Seeker*, and lifetime achievement by a Southern writer. He is believed to be the only Philadelphia taxi driver ever to have claimed either award.

Francis A. Gelper had been a biologist. He wasn't especially well known outside Lockport. Won one or two minor awards, but nothing that raised any eyebrows. But everyone who knew him said he was brilliant. And they said it in a way that told me they meant it. They liked him, too. They all did. His colleagues shook their heads in disbelief that he was gone; several of his students openly cried when I tried to interview them. In his spare time, he was a Little League coach, and he even helped out down at the senior center. Wednesday evenings, he played competitive bridge.

He'd been on his way back to his apartment after a social gathering at the university—they'd been celebrating a prize given to one of the astrophysicists—when he apparently fell asleep at the wheel and drove his hybrid over an embankment. He was thirty-eight years old.

I'd never actually met him. I'd seen him from a distance on several occasions, and spotted him at the supermarket now and then. I'd always planned to do a feature story on him. *Biologist With a Heart*. Instead I got to do a postmortem appreciation.

He was from Twin Rivers, Alabama. I thought the body would be shipped back for the funeral, but they conducted the service locally, at the McComber Funeral Home on Park Street. The place was packed with friends and students. The crowd spilled out into the street.

The service was one of those attempts to celebrate his life rather than recognize his death. They never work, if you ask me. But there were a lot of people who wanted to say something about him. And the speakers all had trouble with their voices.

When it was over, I stood outside with Harvey Pointer, the biology department chairman, watching the crowd dissipate. Harvey and I had gone to school together, been in Scouts together. He was a little guy with an outsize mustache and the same mischievous smile that always made him the prime suspect when something happened. "Did he have a girlfriend?" I asked. "Any marital prospects?"

He shook his head. "I don't think he was the marrying type."

I let the comment go.

"You know, Ron," he said, "Frank got caught up in the genesis problem and he devoted his life to it. He could have gotten a grant in any one of several research areas, but he wanted to settle that one issue. It was the driving force in his career."

It was one of those hard, bright, sunny days when you have to stand facing away from the sun. "What's the genesis problem?" I asked.

Harvey grinned. "How life got started. Where the first cell came from."

"I thought that got settled years ago," I said. "In a laboratory somewhere. Didn't they mix some chemicals and add heat and water? Or was it electricity?"

"No." Harvey stopped to talk to a couple of people from the department. Yeah, they were going to miss him. Damn shame. Then they were gone. "There've always been claims," he said, continuing where he'd left off, "but nothing's ever stood up." He jammed his hands down into his topcoat pockets. "Pity. Solve that one and you get to take a Nobel home."

Genesis. It would make a nice bit to add to the story I'd already half-written.

As far as we could tell, none of Gelper's family had shown up. His mother and father were still living, and he had a brother and sister. When I broached the subject to Harvey he said he didn't know any details. Gelper hadn't talked much about his family. "I don't think he liked them much," he added.

I'd seen odder things over the years, like Arnold Brown's religious conversion at his mother's funeral, and Morey Thomas's insistence when they buried his father that it was no use because the old man wouldn't stay dead. But usually death has a way of bringing families together. Especially when the loss is unexpected.

I wrote the story and went back to covering the routine social calendar for Lockport, doing weddings and visiting authors at the library and writing features on anybody who did anything out of the ordinary. If you discovered you could play a banjo standing on your head, you could make the front page of the *Register*.

So I'd forgotten about Gelper and his missing family when, about a month after the funeral, Harvey called me. "Got something you might be interested in," he said.

"What is it, Harvey?"

"Can you come over?"

You'd expect a department chairman to be set up in a reasonably elaborate office. In fact, he was worse off than I was. They had him jammed into a space about the size of a large closet. He sat behind a desk piled high with folders, magazines, disks, and legal pads. Behind him, a bulletin board had all but disappeared behind a legion of Post-its, schedules, and articles cut from magazines.

He got up when I appeared at the door, waved me in, shook my hand, and indicated a chair. "Good to see you, Ron," he said, leaning back against his desk and folding his arms.

We did a couple of minutes of small talk before he came to the point. "You remember I told you what Frank was working on when he died?"

"Sure," I said. "How life got started."

"You knew he left his papers to the university?"

"No, I didn't. In fact, I hadn't thought of it at all."

"I've been looking through them."

"And—?"

He walked around behind the desk, took his seat, shifted back and forth a few times, and put his hands together. Announcement coming. "I could have called CNN. And the A.P., Ron. Instead I called *you*."

"I appreciate that, Harvey."

He had sharp brown eyes that could look through you. At the moment they had gone dull, as if he'd gone away somewhere. "Frank found the solution."

"To what?"

"Genesis." I stared at him. The eyes came back from wherever they'd been. "He worked out the process by which the first living cells appeared."

The words just hung there. "Are you serious, Harvey?"

He nodded. "You think I'd make jokes about something like that? It's true. At least, as far as we can tell. We haven't run all the tests yet, but the numbers seem to be right."

"Well, you're an honest man, Harvey. You could have taken that for yourself. Claimed credit for a major discovery. Who would have known?"

"What makes you think I won't?"

"How much cash is involved?"

He rubbed his index finger across his mustache. "Truth is, I thought about it, Ron. But I couldn't have gotten away with it."

"Why not?"

"I could never have done the equations. And everybody in the department knows it." He chuckled. "No, this needed somebody brighter than I am." He glanced out through the single window at Culbertson Hall, directly across from us. It was the home of the student center.

Bells went off in the building. I listened to doors opening, the sudden rush of voices in the corridors. "What a pity," I said.

"How do you mean?"

"He makes a major discovery. And is killed before he can announce it. Is it really worth a Nobel?"

"Yes," he said. "If everything bears out, as I suspect it will. But I think there's a misunderstanding. This wasn't a current set of results, Ron. It looks as if he's had it locked up for more than seven years."

I asked whether he could explain it to me. In layman's language, so I could pass it on to my readers. The short answer was *no*. But that didn't stop him from trying. I got out my recorder and he started talking about primal conditions and triggers and carbon and God knows what else. "Could we duplicate it in a laboratory?" I asked.

"Already have."

"Really? You've made *life*?"

"Well, we've done it virtually."

"Okay." What else would my readers want to know? "Why didn't he announce the discovery?"

Harvey had no idea. "It makes no sense," he said. "This was the grail."

"What's he been doing since?"

"Refining his results, looks like."

"Stalling?"

"Maybe." He took a deep breath. "Are you interested in knowing what the odds were against life developing?"

"I've no idea. I've always assumed it was more or less inevitable."

"Not hardly. In fact, if Frank has it right, the possibility was one in trillions."

"That's a big number."

"Actually, it goes up another level. *Quadrillions*." He pushed back and the chair squeaked. "That first living thing requires a precise sequence of a long series of extraordinarily unlikely events. Then it has to survive to reproduce. We were the longest of long shots, Ron."

We stood looking at each other. "I guess it explains why those SETI guys never hear anything."

Nobody who knew Gelper could offer any explanation why he might have withheld his breakthrough. When Harvey reported that the testing results continued to confirm everything, I wondered whether he might have been unaware of the implications. "No," said Harvey. "Not a chance."

So that was how I wrote a story that collected world-wide attention. It's true that hardly anybody in Lockport got excited, but I found myself filing for the A.P. and getting interviewed, along with Harvey, on the Science Channel.

Harvey was getting credit for the work, since he had made it public, and gradually Gelper disappeared into the background. I tracked down a few women who'd dated Gelper on and off, but none of them had suspected he'd been harboring a secret.

Eventually, I called his parents, got the father, and offered my sympathies. He thanked me, but his voice was distant. "*You're one of his friends?*" he asked.

"I'm a reporter for *The Lockport Register*," I said.

"Oh."

"Your son did some very important work, Mr. Gelper. You must be proud of him."

"I've read the stories."

"He did the breakthrough research years ago. But he never released the results."

"So I understand."

"Did he tell you what he was doing?"

"In another age, I was a customs officer on the northern border. During winter nights, when the temperature sank to forty below, and the blizzards came and the traffic stopped, it was *Asimov's* that kept me alert. I retain my passion for the magazine to this day, and sympathize with those unfortunate souls who have never known what it means to catch the late freight to Polaris."

—Jack McDevitt

"No."

"If you don't mind my saying so, Mr. Gelper, that seems strange. I'd expect you would be the first person he'd confide in."

"Mr.—?"

"Haight."

"Mr. Haight, my son and I have not been close. For a long time."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear it." There was silence at the other end. "Can you imagine any reason why he'd have withheld this kind of information?"

"I'm not surprised he did," he said. Then: "Thanks for calling."

"Why?" I asked. "Why are you not surprised?"

"Please let it go."

And I was listening to a dial tone.

He wouldn't agree to an interview. Wouldn't return my calls. So I persuaded Harvey to draw up a departmental certificate of recognition to Francis Gelper. We framed it, and I bought a ticket to Huntsville, on my own dime, rented a car, and drove to Twin Rivers.

Gelper Senior was a retired real estate dealer. He'd been an automobile salesman at one time, had run unsuccessfully for the Twin Rivers school board, and had home-schooled his kids. He was semi-retired at the time of his son's death. Showed up once a week at Gelper and Martin, which specialized in developing new properties.

His wife had, for a few years, been a math instructor at the local high school. They lived just outside town in a two-story brick home with columns and maybe a quarter-acre. A gardener was digging at some azalea bushes when I pulled into the driveway.

Mrs. Gelper answered the door. I'd seen no recent photos of her, but she was easy to recognize. She was well into her sixties, with blonde hair pulled back, blue eyes, and the sort of disconnected gaze that let me know I was of minor significance. "Yes?" she said, glancing down at the envelope in which I carried Frank's award.

I introduced myself and explained that I'd come from Lockport University. In Maryland. She made no move to invite me inside.

"They've issued your son a certificate of appreciation," I continued.

"Oh," she said. "That's very kind of them." We stood there looking at each other.

A voice in back somewhere broke in: "Who's at the door, Margaret?"

She stepped aside and I saw Gelper Senior, *Charlie* Gelper, who had apparently been asleep on the sofa. "Please come in," she said. Then, to her husband: "He's brought something. For Frank."

I couldn't say the guy was hostile. But he clearly wanted me out of there. Apparently misunderstanding, he said that Frank was dead.

"It's an award," I said. "In recognition of his service."

He got up from the couch and watched while I removed the certificate from a padded manila envelope and held it out for whichever of them might choose to take it. Margaret did. She looked at it and smiled. "Thank you," she said.

Gelper nodded. "Tell them we appreciate it." I could see the son in the father. Same features, same wide shoulders, same eyes. He waited his

turn, took the certificate from her, frowned at it, and said thanks again. The presentation was over.

"I don't know whether you're aware," I said, "but he's made a significant contribution to his field."

"So we've heard," said Margaret.

"They're mystified at the school." I tried to be casual. And of course when you try hard to be casual you know what happens.

She exchanged smiles with her husband. "Can I get you something? Coffee, maybe?"

"Yes, please." I was grateful she'd loosened up a bit.

Gelper laid the certificate on a side table. We were standing in the living room. They didn't lack for money. Leather furniture. Large double windows looking out on the grounds. Etched glassware. Finely carved bookshelves.

A copy of *The Hunting Digest* lay on a chair, and half a dozen books were arranged on one of the shelves. The others were devoted to artificial flowers, reproductions of classic art works, and framed photos.

"You from Lockport?" Gelper asked.

"Yes, sir. Lived there all my life."

I steered the conversation onto hunting, admitted I knew nothing about it, pretended it was something I'd always wanted to do. The coffee came. Margaret asked how well I'd known their son.

"Only in passing," I said. "But everybody he worked with, and his students, all thought very highly of him."

Eventually I was able to get back to Frank's failure to report what he'd found. "It baffles everybody. Harvey, his department head, says if he'd revealed what he knew, he'd have won the Nobel."

Margaret nodded. "I can tell you why he said nothing." Her voice shook.

"Why?" I asked.

"The newspapers say the process is so convoluted, that it requires such a conjunction of unlikely events, that the odds against it are almost infinite."

"And—?" I said.

"Scientists,"—she said it as if she were referring to a disreputable pack—"were expecting that it would be routine. You get water, and sunlight, and a few basic elements, and next thing you know you have squirrels."

"It didn't work out that way," I said, trying to encourage her.

She nodded. "No. Despite all the talk, it took the hand of God. That's what Frank proved, what he wanted to deny. It's the fifth day." Tears were beginning to run down her cheeks.

Gelper came up behind her, held her shoulders, and looked down at me. He was an imposing figure. "He couldn't have stood that kind of result," he said in a soft voice. "He abandoned his faith a long time ago. I don't know whether you understand what that means. But it's why he kept it quiet. He lived in denial. Denied everything we know to be true." He looked shaken. "He was denying the Lord right to the end. Think about it. At this moment, our son is in hell."

* * *

Well, I didn't know how to respond to that so I said thanks for your time and left. As soon as I was clear of the neighborhood, I called Harvey. "I don't think his folks approved of him."

"You figure out why?"

"It's a religious thing, apparently. They said something about a fifth day."

"It figures. They would have been referring to Genesis, I guess. The fifth day was when God created the first living things."

"It was a sad scene back there, Harvey. I thought religion was supposed to be a comfort."

"Not always. I guess his being gay didn't help, either."

"You didn't say he was gay."

"I couldn't see any reason to spread it around, Ron. I slipped just now, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't print it."

"I won't. But I've interviewed some women who said they had dated him."

"I guess you could say he played both sides of the aisle."

I thought about Gelper standing there trembling and it occurred to me that *he* was the one in hell.

I rode down to the local library, commandeered a computer, and did a search on Francis Gelper. I'd done that before, of course, when I'd been putting the original story together. Thousands of entries had popped up. Gelper on telomeres for *Nature*. Gelper discusses evolutionary extracts for *The Darwin Newsletter*. Gelper on cell cycle checkpoints for *Scientific American*.

But this time I narrowed the search. I added "gay."

The usual range of off-the-subject results showed up. Joe Gelper plays Gaylord Batterly in *Over the Top*, with George Francis conducting. Time travel novel *Back to the Gay Nineties* by Marie Gelper, one of the year's best, according to Mark Francis. Then I saw the one that froze me. It was from something called *The Revelation Bulletin*:

Exorcism Rites Performed on Three Boys

Twin Rivers, Ala. April 11. Three teenaged boys received exorcism rites this past Sunday at the Divine Beneficence Church. The ceremony was conducted by the Rev. Harry Parver, while hundreds of worshippers watched in awe.

The article went on to name the teens. One of them was Francis Gelper. I checked the date. He would have been fifteen.

I looked up the Divine Beneficence Church, and drove over. It was a picturesque place, not as big as it sounded in the story. It was freshly painted, with a white picket fence sealing off the grounds, and a large signboard exhorting everyone to attend the Mighty Soldiers of the Lord Revival that weekend. The Rev. Parver was listed as rector.

Ten minutes later I was back at the Gelper place.

They were surprised to see me. "Tell me about the exorcism," I said.

Margaret went pale; Gelper took to glaring at me. "I don't see how it's any of your business," he said.

"What did he have to do? Stand at the front of the church while all his friends watched? And somebody prayed over him?"

Margaret looked through me. "We had no choice. We were fighting for his soul."

"Did he have to confess his sins to the entire congregation?"

Gelper started for me. "Get out," he said.

"That explains why he kept it quiet, doesn't it?"

"I already told you why. He was denying his God. No wonder he died young."

He was moving toward me with his fists balled. I'm not normally all that brave when it comes to physical confrontations. But on that afternoon I was in a rage and I stood my ground. "You got it wrong, Gelper," I said. "He knew the conclusion *you'd* jump to. That his results supported *your* notions of creation. And he didn't want that. He wasn't denying God. He was denying *your* vision of things. He was denying *you*. He sacrificed everything rather than allow you to misread his work."

Harvey informs me the odds against life in any one place are so remote that they exceed the estimated number of worlds in biozones in the entire universe by a factor of three. If we assume that the sort of life we know, the carbon-based type that needs liquid water, is the only kind possible, then the chances were two to one against the appearance anywhere of a single living creature. We got lucky. That's what Harvey says.

But the estimate of the number of eligible planets is wildly speculative. Nobody has a clue how big the universe actually is. So all the talk about probabilities is, in the end, just talk.

Still, when I look at the night sky now, it's different from what it used to be. It feels cold. And impersonal. Just a machine.

I wonder if Frank Gelper had felt the same way. And if, in the end, that was the real reason he kept everything to himself. ○

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This celebrated author's most recent books include the two-volume fantasy Wizard Knight series, which consists of *The Wizard* and *The Knight*, and *Soldier of Sidon*, which was published by Tor Books late last year. In his newest story, Gene upends reality to take a disquieting look at life under . . .

GREEN GLASS

Gene Wolfe

The passage, so narrow his shoulder rubbed its slick walls, ended abruptly at a wide space in which a naked woman sat cross-legged, her eyes closed, as though meditating. He thought of speaking, then of coughing. They seemed to him equally impolite. Silently, he seated himself instead and studied her.

She was young, hardly more than a girl. Brown hair—long, soft, and nearly straight—veiled her shoulders. Her face was lovely without being conventionally pretty, a face (he thought) as pure and clean as spring water. If she was not real . . .

He admitted the possibility. It was possible, in fact very probable, that she was not. If she was not, he hoped to go insane. To believe her, a soulless phantom conjured from his own fevered imagination, wholly real and as human as he.

Anything else, any smallest shred of doubt, would be unbearable.

She was sitting in the middle of an open area. He propped his back against a featureless green wall and sat facing her. There was no time. No day and no night. His mind wandered, and for the most part wandered among nothing, nowhere.

At last she looked up and smiled. "Hello? Are you real?"

He grinned, "I think so. What are they going to do with us?"

"Watch us together, maybe. If you're real. Can you get us out of here?"

"I can't even get myself out. What about you?"

"No. I—I meet people here. People who aren't real. Some of them are people I know. Knew."

He nodded. "Same here."

"I ask them to get me out. They say they will, or that they'll try. Only I never do. What's your name?"

"Joey. I was named for a baby kangaroo."

She giggled. "I like that. Last name?"

"De Mio. Now you'll think I'm a Mafioso. My dad's in the ice-cream business, a wholesaler. Does that help?"

"It didn't need any help. I'm Josephine Bates, and I've been trying to place your accent. St. Louis?"

He shook his head. "Chicago."

"In the ice-cream business."

"Right. Where are you from, Ms. Bates?"

"San Diego. You can call me Josephine, Joey. You said you meet people in here like I do."

He nodded.

"People you know?"

"Sometimes. Some were characters from TV. Or movies I'd seen. Harry Potter. Bugs Bunny."

"Are we crazy?"

"How should I know?" He rubbed his chin. "There's a way to test it, Josephine. We meet some together and compare notes afterward. If we saw the same thing—"

"I've got it. How'd you get here, Joey?"

"You wouldn't believe it." He shook his head. "Heck, I don't believe it, and I was there. It happened to me, but I still don't believe it."

"Will you believe me?"

"Sure." He grinned. "Anything."

"Then I'd believe you, right?"

He shook his head. "Wrong. I'm a good judge of character. That's how I know you're a good judge of character too, see? I know you can be trusted. You'll know I can't."

"You're sneaky?"

"Close enough. How'd they get you?"

"I was driving down two-oh-one, somewhere between Moose River and Madison. I must have taken a wrong turn. I don't know where or how, but I sort of woke up and realized I wasn't on the highway anymore. I was on a country road or something like that, and it had just gotten narrower. I went down into a long, dark valley with a lot of big trees . . ."

He said, "If this still scares you, you don't have to tell me."

"I was just trying to remember. No lights except my headlights. The trees shutting out the moon and the stars. Up ahead, some kind of animal, big and dark. Its eyes looked yellow in my headlights. I slammed on the brakes, and it was gone. Just gone, like it had never been there at all. I went forward again, slower, out of the valley and up onto a hilltop. There was moonlight all around, as if I were inside the moon with light coming at me from all directions. I thought to myself, *if I had a soul, I'd stop right here and enjoy this.*

"As soon as I did, as soon as I had thought that, my headlights went out and my engine quit. I kept on rolling, slower and slower. Rolling up to the very top of the hill. Finally my car stopped and I got out. I guess I was go-

"It's hard for me to believe that *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* has turned thirty. I recall early issues when Isaac himself peeped out of the "O" in *Asimov's*, issues to which he was a regular contributor. Heavenly days, I recall Isaac, gracious, funny, and smart. There was never a quicker man with a quip, nor a man more concerned to see that his quips gave no one serious pain. He was a man I knew and counted as a friend, and a man I would have liked to know much better.

"His magazine is the same way. I've read it since the first issue. I've sold it stories, beginning I believe with "The Woman Who Loved the Centaur Pholus" in January of 1979. I've chatted with George Scithers, Gardner Dozois, and Sheila Williams whenever I got the opportunity. It is one of the few magazines I'll always subscribe to. But I don't know it from the inside, and I'm hoping Sheila will tell us a little about that now."

—Gene Wolfe

ing to open the hood or something."

"Did you?"

She shook her head. "When I stepped out, my foot wouldn't stick. Know what I mean? It wouldn't stay down and I went up, slowly, sort of trying to grab the ground with my feet but never getting hold of it. There was a big round thing right above me, like an umbrella but a whole lot bigger. A hole opened and I floated up into it. I couldn't help myself, and here I am. Now what about you?"

"Later, maybe." He stood. "I'm a pretty good liar, but I hate it when people think I'm lying and I'm really telling them the truth. Let's go into these tunnels or whatever they are."

"Passageways. I've been in them, and there's nothing in there."

"I was in there." He touched his chest.

"Really?"

"Sure. I came out of there, and you were sitting there so pretty, and I sat down to look at you."

She smiled. "Want to give me a hand up?"

"Happy to." He did, finding her hand small but stronger than he expected.

"Which one did you come out of, Joey?"

"I . . ." The room in which she had sat was ringed by the mouths of passages, all green and twilit, each promising neither more nor less than nothing. "That one, I think. Or else that one next to it."

"I don't think we ought to split up."

"Neither do I. It's just the other way, if you ask me. We've got to stay together, no matter what happens."

"Want to pick?"

He shook his head. "You do it, Josephine."

"All right, this one. You go first."

The floor was smooth without being slick. We could dance in here, he thought. Hip hop, or whatever she wants to do. Ballroom even, if that's what she would like. Only there's no music.

A voice behind him said, "Hello, you two."

He turned, looking over Josephine's shoulder.

"Fields is my name." The speaker wore an old-fashioned tuxedo. "Shep Fields and His Rippling Rhythm. Ever hear us? We used to be big."

"We don't need a band," Josephine said. "We need to get out of here—to get off this flying saucer or whatever it is and get back home."

From somewhere behind Shep Fields, a swing band struck up "Vaya Con Dios."

"Let's go!" With an emphatic gesture, Josephine urged Joey forward. "He can't help us. Or he won't."

Shep did not follow them, but his music did. "It will be over soon," Josephine said.

Joey nodded, wanting to hum under his breath. "Who was that? Was he someone you used to know?"

"You didn't recognize him?"

Joey shook his head.

"One of mine then. Did he tell you who he was? He told me. Do you remember the name?"

"Shep Fields?" Momentarily, Joey stopped to search his memory. "He said something about rippling rhythm."

"That's good. We heard the same thing. How was he dressed?"

"Old fashioned. Formal. A—a tux. Is that what they called them? Only the coat was white."

"Right. A dinner jacket. So we saw the same thing, too. I took a class in college, American Musical History. There was a tape with interviews of some old-time band leaders, and one of them was Shep Fields. He was dressed like that. They pulled him out of my mind."

"Who's they?"

"Whoever's running this saucer. Move!"

Joey walked again, faster. "Will we meet more like that?"

"Not unless we walk. Or I don't think so."

"Vaya Con Dios" sighed away to silence; but the band was there and playing for a long while afterward, something about stars getting in people's eyes and a moon that broke a heart.

The doctor appeared around a bend in the twisting tunnel just as the music ended, a dark, lean man with profile that might have been hacked from wood with a chain saw. "Dr. Leonard!" Josephine looked radiant. "How did you get here?"

"Kidnapped. I imagine the same thing happened to you. Do you want to get out? To go home?"

Josephine exclaimed, "Do we ever!" but Joey held his peace.

"Good. I'm going to need you, Miss Bates. I'm going to need that strapping young man with you even more. There are six of them on board. They're not strong, but I doubt that I could handle all six by myself."

"You're going to take over the saucer?"

"We are. Or anyway, we're going to try. They've let me see a little—more than they thought I was seeing, I expect. We're still orbiting Earth, although we're keeping behind the moon for the most part. As long as we are, I think I can get us back. Setting us down safely should

be no problem. There's a sophisticated system for preventing crashes. Let's go."

Joey asked, "How about weapons?"

"I've got some hidden. I'll show you. Come on!"

Dr. Leonard strode away and turned into a side passage. When Joey and Josephine reached the corner, he was nowhere in sight.

She sighed. "I knew that one was too good to be true. He's a doctor—the real one is, I mean. I guess I think doctors can fix just about everything."

Joey nodded. "A lot of women are like that."

"But they can't, and they'll tell you so themselves. There are diseases they can't cure, and everybody dies sooner or later, no matter how many doctors work to keep them alive. Hug me, Joey."

He did, and they kissed.

"That was good," she said when they parted for the third time, "I needed to feel somebody real. They're watching us. You know that?"

He shrugged.

"They're bound to be. They're watching us the way guys in the psych department used to watch the mice in their mazes. They saw us kiss."

"I don't care," Joey said.

"Neither do I. All right, I do. Really I do. I don't like being watched by people I can't see. I'd like to get even with them someday, and maybe I will."

Slowly, hand in hand, they walked along the passage. When they had gone a hundred steps or more, she said, "Why do they do it?"

"Study us? I don't know."

"Show us Dr. Leonard. Shep Fields. All the dream people."

"You told me how they got you," Joey said. "I didn't tell you how they got me."

"You said I wouldn't believe it, and I didn't want to pressure you."

"Thanks. Now I am, probably. I guess I will. My mom and dad have an apartment in Chicago. I've got a job, but I still live with them. That probably sounds like I'm one of those kids who won't grow up."

"Only I know you're not," Josephine said. "Go on."

"I'd like to have an apartment of my own, sure. Or maybe a place I'd share with somebody and we'd split the rent, but I pay five hundred a month to mom and dad for rent and food and they need the money. It's a really nice apartment in a really nice building. My dad's retired now, and they couldn't afford to keep it if it weren't for the money I kick in. None of this is what I started out to say."

"No hurry," she told him. "We're walking anyway, and we might as well talk to pass the time."

"Well, I ran into the super one day, and he wanted to know if I'd seen what they'd done to the roof. I said no, and he said there were all sorts of trees and flowers and stuff up there now, like a park for the tenants, and we could bring guests up if we wanted. So I went up and had a look around. It was maybe six o'clock, and the sunset was really, really pretty."

"The roof was, too. There were pots and planters. Little trees and flowers and so on. Ferns, too. I remember a lot of ferns. Maybe I didn't notice

the flowers so much because they were closing. They close up at night just like stores, or some of them do. I read about that someplace."

Josephine nodded.

"Looking at that sunset with all that green around me reminded me of a big green-glass bottle I had when I was a kid. I'd put bugs and things in there so I could study them. That's what I thought I was doing, anyway. I'd take it along when we went to the park, and if I found an interesting bug or a big spider I'd put it in there. Back home, I'd watch it and pretend I was a scientist. My mother finally got tired of finding it with dead bugs in it and pitched it out."

"I don't think I like where this is going."

"Neither do I. Another thing I wanted to say is that I really did learn something from watching all the bugs in that green bottle. What I learned was that sometimes they thought they were seeing other bugs when they saw their own reflections in the glass. I think that's what's going on with us—we're seeing our own reflections, seeing things we've got in our brains. The aliens or whatever they are may not even know we're seeing them. But we are." He recalled Shep Fields' band and added, "We hear them, too. Maybe we'd even smell them, if we got close enough."

"I think so, too," Josephine said, "only I think they know about it. You knew about it when you watched your bugs, and you were just a little kid. They're a lot smarter than you. Smarter than you were then, I mean."

"Smarter than I am now."

"Smarter than both of us put together, probably. I still want to get out—to get back home. Did you ever turn your bugs loose, Joey?"

He could not remember, but he said he had and his mother had freed more.

"Then we've still got a chance. If . . . It's another one."

The tall man striding toward them waved. "Captain Anno of the Past Police at your service." To the wave, he attached a jocular salute. "I know you think I'm just a character in a movie. You need me just the same, and I'm here to help you."

"You mean you're not?" Josephine sounded incredulous.

"No, ma'am. The film was a little piece of propaganda on our part. You're entering a period of increased Zkogan activity, and our film was intended to get you accustomed to the concept and show you that we're the good guys. Which we are. You want to be rescued, don't you? If you don't, I'll split."

"You bet we do," Josephine said.

Joey nodded his agreement.

"Fine. I'm not allowed to bring you into your future, you understand—uptime into my own period. It's against regulations."

Joey nodded again. "It was in the movie."

"Right. What I can do, if you want, is return you to a time moments after the Zkogan seized you. They'll be gone by then. You may or may not remember all this. If you do, you may repress it." Captain Anno raised his palms in a gesture of amused helplessness. "Ultimately, that'll be up to you. I can't control it. Do you want to go?"

"Yes," Joey told him.

"Absolutely," Josephine added, "but I want to ask one question first. Just one. May I?"

"We've plenty of time." Captain Anno smiled. "Fire away."

"Why are our names so much alike? I mean Joey's and mine. My Aunt Virginia used to say coinkydink. Is that what this is? Just coinkydink?"

"No." The captain's face was serious now, and even a trifle hard. "The Zkogan are working their way through the alphabet. There was a time when they took half a dozen men named Ambrose, for example. We'd love to know why they operate in that fashion, but we don't. We're hoping that when they get down to Zeke and Zelda they'll stop. But we're afraid it's going to be something much worse."

Joey said, "You could just go there, couldn't you? And see?"

"I'm afraid not. That time lies in my own future. You can fall to the floor, Joey. You can do that very easily. Let's see you fall to the ceiling."

Captain Anno turned toward Josephine. "Close your eyes, please. Close them and keep them closed. It's very important. Crucial, in fact. When I say 'go,' you are to rap your heels together three times, understand? One, two, three. Neither less nor more. After the third such rap, but only then, you may open them. Is that understood? If it's not, I can go over it again."

Josephine nodded.

He turned back to Joey. "You heard me, and the escape and evasion procedure will be the same for you. Try to time your heel raps to coincide with hers. The closer you come, the better off you'll be, both of you. Got it?"

"Got it," Joey said wearily. He had been trying to pretend he thought Captain Anno real; in a sudden epiphany, he understood that Josephine was doing the same.

"Good. Shut your eyes, both of you, and wait for my signal."

Joey did not quite close his, and through their slits watched Captain Anno fade away.

"He's gone," Josephine said, "and we're not. I'm just so tired."

"I understand."

"I want to sleep. I'm going to lie down right here. This place is as good as any place in this whole terrible place. You can lie down, too, if you want to."

He did not, but sat down at her head.

"Maybe I can dream about home," she whispered.

After a minute or two she added, "Maybe when I wake up, they'll have given us water, and something to eat."

Still later, when he thought she might be asleep, she said, "I know what you'd like to do and I'd like to do that, too, but not while they're watching. Tell me about your green bottle again. Tell me all that stuff, and finish it. Maybe it will help me sleep."

*If she isn't real, Jody thought, she'll fade away when she sleeps.
Or when I do.*

Stroking her hair, he watched her, finding her as warm and real as ever. "I'd had this green glass bottle when I was a kid. I guess it was an old wine

bottle or something. I'd put bugs and spiders in there so I could watch them. I told you about all that.

"Then when I went up on the roof where the garden was, there was green all around. It wasn't quite dark, but I think I might have seen one or two stars if I'd looked for them. It was quiet and green everywhere. Very quiet, because there was nobody up there but me. Nobody at all, Josephine, just me all alone."

Her breathing seemed to him to have grown softer and more regular. Still stroking her, he continued.

"It was all green, because the flowers had closed. They're candy stores for bees, really, but the bees had gone to bed and the flowers had closed their doors. The plants had gone to sleep, and the birds had gone home, if there had been any birds.

"I sat on one of the benches for a while, thinking about the trees and flowers and how all those things would still be there when our building had been torn down and nobody remembered it at all. After a while, I got up and sat on one of the swings. I had walked all over the roof, and knew I couldn't get off it on any side. There was the street on the east and the alley on the west. There were other buildings north and south, but they were too far away for me to jump to. Too far, and a lot lower than ours anyway.

"It reminded me of that old green bottle my mother had thrown away a long time ago, and that reminded me that I had seen a green bottle up there on the roof while I was walking around. So I went looking for it and found it pretty easily. It was a soft drink bottle, some kind of lemon-lime drink. I don't like those—I like Pepsi or Dr. Pepper. But someone else had liked them and had brought a cold bottle up to the roof to drink, and then had put the bottle in one of the planters instead of taking it back to his apartment.

"I took it back to the swing and sat down again and just sort of looked at it and thought about my old bottle. How had the bugs felt in there? I had watched them trying and trying to get out, but I had never thought at all about how they felt.

"Then I turned that bottle inside out, so that I was inside and the whole world was outside. And when I did that, just an hour or so ago, here I was. Maybe we'd be home if I could turn it the right way again."

His hand still stroked, but it seemed to him that it stroked nothing, that the silky smoothness of her soft brown hair had slowly drained away as he spoke. He looked down. His fingers were fading even as they moved, their tips vanished already, the rest translucent, unsure, and unreal. ○

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DEAD MONEY

Lucius Shepard

Lucius Shepard's first story for *Asimov's*, "A Traveler's Tale," appeared in our July 1984 issue. His latest novel, "Dead Money," which returns to the eerie milieu of his first book, *Green Eyes* (Ace Special, 1986), is his twenty-seventh tale to appear in our pages. These stories have won the Hugo, the Nebula, and our own Readers' Awards, and many of them have been reprinted in his two World Fantasy Award Winning Collection, *The Jaguar Hunter* (1988) and *The Ends of the Earth* (1992). Nightshade Books has just published the author's most recent novel, *Softspoken*, and a new short story collection will be out in the summer.

A word of warning: there are scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some readers.

I knew slim-with-sideburns was dead money before Geneva introduced him to the game. Dead money doesn't need an introduction; dead money declares himself by grinning too wide and playing it too cool, pretending to be relaxed while his shoulders are racked with tension, and proceeds to lose all his chips in a hurry. Slim-with-sideburns-and-sharp-features-and-a-gimp-walk showed us the entire menu, plus he was wearing a pair of wraparound shades. Now there are a number of professional poker players who wear sunglasses so as not to give away their tells, but you would mistake none of them for dead money and they would never venture into a major casino looking like some kind of country-and-western spaceman.

"Gentlemen," Geneva said, shaking back her big blonde hair. "This here's Josey Pellerin over from Lafayette."

A couple of the guys said, Hey, and a couple of others introduced themselves, but Mike Morrissey, Mad Mike, who was in the seat next to mine, said, "Not *the* Josie? Of Josie and the Pussycats?"

The table had a laugh at that, but Pellerin didn't crack a smile. He took

a chair across from Mike, lowering himself into it carefully, his arms shaking, and started stacking his chips. Muscular dystrophy, I thought. Some wasting disease. I pegged him for about my age, late thirties, and figured he would overplay his first good hand and soon be gone.

Mike, who likes to get under players' skins, said, "Didn't I see you the other night hanging out with 'A Boy Named Sue'?"

In a raspy, southern-fried voice, Pellerin said, "I've watched you on TV, Mister Morrissey. You're not as entertaining as you think, and you don't have that much game."

Mike pretended to shudder and that brought another laugh. "Let's see what you got, pal," he said. "Then we can talk about my game."

Geneva, a good-looking woman even if she is mostly silicon and botox, washed a fresh deck, spreading the cards across the table, and shuffled them up.

The game was cash only, no-limit Texas Hold 'Em. It was held in a side room of Harrah's New Orleans with a table ringed by nine barrel-backed chairs upholstered in red velvet and fake French Colonial stuff—fancy swords, paintings with gilt frames, and such—hanging on walls the color of cocktail sauce. Geneva, who was a friend, let me sit in once in a while to help me maintain the widely held view that I was someone important, whereas I was, in actuality, a typical figment of the Quarter, a man with a few meaningful connections and three really good suits.

It wasn't unusual to have a couple of pros in the game, but the following week Harrah's was sponsoring a tournament with a million dollar first prize and a few big hitters had already filtered into town. Aside from Mad Mike, Avery Holt was at the table, Sammy Jawanda, Deng Ky (aka Denghis Khan), and Annie Marcus. The amateurs in the game were Pellerin, Jeremy LeGros, an investment banker with deep pockets, and myself, Jack Lamb.

Texas Hold 'Em is easy to learn, but it will cost you to catch on to the finer points. To begin with, you're dealt two down cards, then you bet; then comes the flop, three up cards in the center of the table that belong to everyone. You bet some more. Then an up card that's called the turn and another round of betting. Then a final up card, the river, and more betting . . . unless everyone has folded to the winner. I expected Pellerin to play tight, but five minutes hadn't passed before he came out firing and pushed in three thousand in chips. Le Gros and Mike went with him to the flop. King of hearts, trey of clubs, heart jack. Pellerin bet six thousand. LeGros folded and Mike peeked at his down cards.

"They didn't change on you, did they?" asked Pellerin.

Mike raised him four thousand. That told me Pellerin had gotten into his head. The smart play would have been either to call or to get super aggressive. A middling raise like four thousand suggested a lack of confidence. Of course with Mad Mike, you never knew when he was setting a trap. Pellerin pushed it again, raising ten K, not enough to make Mike bag the hand automatically. Mike called. The card on the turn was a three of hearts, pairing the board. Pellerin checked and Mike bet twenty.

"You must have yourself a hand," said Pellerin. "But your two pair's not going to cut it. I'm all in."

He had about sixty thousand stacked in front of him and Mike could have covered the bet, but it wasn't a percentage play—losing would have left him with the short chip stack and it was too early in the evening to

take the risk. He tried staring a hole through Pellerin, fussed with his chips, and eventually mucked his hand.

"You're not the dumbest son-of-a-bitch who ever stole a pot from me," he said.

"Don't suppose I am," said Pellerin.

As I watched—and that is what I mainly did, push in antes and watch—it occurred to me that once he sat down, Pellerin had stopped acting like dead money, as if all his anxiety had been cured by the touch of green felt and plastic aces. He was one hell of a hold 'em player. He never lost much and it seemed that he took down almost every big pot. Whenever he went head-to-head against somebody, he did about average . . . except when he went up against Mad Mike. Him, he gutted. It was evident that he had gotten a good read on Mike. In less than two hours he had 90 percent of the man's money. He had also developed a palsy in his left hand and was paler than he had been when he'd entered.

The door opened, the babble of the casino flowed in and a security man ushered a doe-eyed, long-legged brunette wearing a black cocktail dress into the room. She had some age on her—in her mid-thirties, I estimated—and her smile was low wattage, a depressive's smile. Nonetheless, she was an exceptionally beautiful woman with a pale olive complexion and a classically sculpted face, her hair arranged so that it fell all to one side. A shade too much make-up was her only flaw. She came up behind Pellerin, bent down, absently caressing the nape of his neck, and whispered something. He said, "You're going to have to excuse me, gentlemen. My nurse here's a real hardass. But I'll be glad to take your money again tomorrow night."

He scooted back his chair; the brunette caught his arm and helped him to stand.

Mike, who had taken worse beats in his career, overcame his bad mood and asked, "Where you been keeping yourself, man?"

"Around," said Pellerin. "But I've been inactive 'til recently."

I smelled something wrong about Pellerin. Wrong rose off him like stink off the Ninth Ward. World class poker players don't just show up, they don't materialize out of nowhere and take a hundred large off Mad Mike Morrissey, without acquiring some reputation in card rooms and small casinos. And his success wasn't due to luck. What Pellerin had done to Mike was as clean a gutting as I had ever witnessed. The next two nights, I stayed out of the game and observed. Pellerin won close to half a million, though the longest he played at a single sitting was four hours. The casino offered him a spot in the tournament, but he declined on the grounds of poor health—he was recovering from an injury, he said, and was unable to endure the long hours and stress of tournament play. My sources informed me that, according to the county records, nobody named Josey Pellerin lived in or near Lafayette. That didn't surprise me. I knew a great number of people who had found it useful to adopt another name and place of residence. I did, however, manage to dredge up some interesting background on the brunette.

Jocundra Verret, age forty-two, single, had been employed by Tulane University nearly twenty years before, working for the late Dr. Hideki Ezawa, who had received funding during the 1980s to investigate the possible sci-

entific basis of certain voodoo remedies. She had left the project, as they say, under a cloud. That was as much as I could gather from the redacted document that fell into my hands. After Tulane, she had worked as a private nurse until a year ago; since that time, her paychecks had been signed by the Darden Corporation, an outfit whose primary holdings were in the fields of bioengineering and medical technology. She, Pellerin, and another man, Dr. Samuel Crain, had booked a suite at Harrah's on a corporate card, the same card that paid for an adjoining suite occupied by two other men, one of whom had signed the register as D. Vader. They were bulky, efficient sorts, obviously doing duty as bodyguards.

I had no pressing reason to look any deeper, but the mention of voodoo piqued my interest. While I was not myself a devotee, my parents had both been occasional practitioners and those childhood associations of white candles burning in storefront temples played a part in my motivation. That night, when Pellerin sat down at the table, I went searching for Ms. Verret and found her in a bar just off the casino floor, drinking a sparkling water. She had on gray slacks and a cream-colored blouse, and looked quite fetching. The bodyguards were nowhere in sight, but I knew they must be in the vicinity. I dropped onto the stool beside her and introduced myself.

"I'm not in the mood," she said.

"Neither am I, cher. The doctor tells me it's permanent, but when I saw you I felt a flicker of hope."

She ducked her head, hiding a smile. "You really need to go. I'm expecting someone."

"Under different circumstances, I'd be delighted to stick around and let you break my heart. But sad to say, this is a business call. I was wondering how come a bunch like the Darden Corporation is bankrolling a poker player."

Startled, she darted her eyes toward me, but quickly recovered her poise. "The people I work for are going to ask why you were talking to me," she said evenly. "I can tell them you were hitting on me, but if you don't leave in short order, I won't be able to get away with that explanation."

"I assume you're referring in the specific to the two large gentlemen who've got the suite next to yours. Don't you worry. They won't do anything to me."

"It's not what they might do to *you* that's got me worried," she said.

"I see. Okay." I got to my feet. "That being the case, perhaps it'd be best if we talked at a more opportune time. Say tomorrow morning? Around ten in the coffee shop?"

"Please stay away from me," she said. "I'm not going to talk to you."

I have so many good memories concerning *Asimov's*, they'd be impossible to list. Meeting Isaac up in the old offices on Lexington Ave. My friendship with Gardner and Sheila. Perhaps my most salient memory among many kindnesses done relates to a time when I was incapacitated, living in New York, and working on a story that used the I Ching, and Sheila persuaded her husband, David, to run all over Manhattan to find me the proper translation. Best of luck to the magazine for the next thirty years.

—Lucius Shepard

As I left the bar, I saw the bodyguards playing the dollar slots near the entrance—one glanced at me incuriously, but kept on playing. I walked down the casino steps, exiting onto Canal Street, and had a smoke. It was muggy, the stars dim. High in the west, a sickle moon was encased in an envelope of mist. I looked at the neon signs, the traffic, listened to the chatter and laughter of by-passers with drinks in their hands. Post-Katrina New Orleans pretending that it was the Big Easy, teetering on the edge of boom or bust. Though Verret had smiled at me, I could think of no easy way to hustle her, and I decided to give Billy Pitch a call and see whether he thought the matter was worth pursuing.

I had to go through three flunkies before I got to Billy. "What you want?" he said. "You know this is *Survivor* night."

"I forgot, Billy. Want me to call back? I can call back."

"This is the two-hour finale, then the reunion show. Won't be over 'til eleven and I'm shutting it down after that. Now you got something for me or don't you?"

I could hear laughter in the background and I hesitated, picturing him hunched over the phone in his den, a skinny, balding white man whom you might mistake for an insurance salesman or a CPA, no doubt clad in one of his neon-colored smoking jackets.

"Jack, you better have something good," Billy said. "Hair's starting to sprout from my palms."

"I'm not sure how good it is, but . . ."

"I'm missing the immunity challenge. The penultimate moment of the entire season. And I got people over, you hear?"

Billy was the only person I knew who could pronounce vowels with a hiss. I gave him the gist of it, trying not to omit any significant details, but speeding it along as best I could.

"Interesting," he said. "Tell me again what she said when you spoke to her." I repeated the conversation.

"It would seem that Miz Verret's agenda is somewhat different from that of the Darden Corporation," Billy said. "Otherwise, she'd have no compunction about reporting your conversation."

"That was my take."

"Voodoo business," he said musingly.

"I can't be sure it's got anything to do with voodoo."

"Naw, this here is voodoo business. It has a certain taint." Billy made a clicking noise. "I'll get back to you in the morning."

"I was just trying to do you a favor, Billy. I don't need to be involved."

"Honey, I know how it's supposed to work, but you're involved. I got too many eggs in my basket to be dealing with anything else right now. This pans out, I'm putting you in charge."

The last thing I had wanted was to be in business with Billy Pitch. It wasn't that you couldn't make a ton of money with Billy, but he was a supremely dangerous and unpleasant human being, and he tended to be hard on his associates. Often he acted precipitately and there were more than a few widows who had received a boatload of flowers and a card containing Billy's apologies and a fat check designed to compensate for their

loss and his lamentable error in judgment. In most cases, this unexpected death benefit served to expunge the ladies' grief, but Alice Delvecchio, the common-law wife of Danny "Little Man" Prideau, accused Billy of killing her man and, shortly after the police investigation hit a dead end, she and her children disappeared. It was rumored that Billy had raised her two sons himself and that, with his guidance, hormone treatments, and the appropriate surgery, they had blossomed into lovely teenage girls, both of whom earned their keep in a brothel catering to oil workers.

Much to my relief, no call came the following morning. I thought that Billy must have checked out Pellerin and Verret, found nothing to benefit him, and hadn't bothered getting back to me. But around ten o'clock that evening, I fielded a call from Huey Rafael, one of Billy's people. He said that Billy wanted me to run on out to an address in Abundance Square and take charge of a situation.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Billy says for you to get your butt over here."

Abundance Square was in the Ninth Ward, a few blocks from the levee, and was, as far as I knew, utterly abandoned. That made me nervous.

"I'm coming," I said. "But I'd like to know something about the situation. So I can prepare for it, you understand."

"You ain't need nothing to prepare you for this." Huey's laugh was a baritone hiccup. "Got some people want watching over. Billy say you the man for the job."

"Who are these people?" I asked, but Huey had ended the call.

I was angry. In the past, Billy had kept a close eye on every strand of his web, but nowadays he tended to delegate authority and spent much of his time indulging his passion for reality TV. He knew more about *The Amazing Race* and *Project Runway* than he did about his business. Sooner or later, I thought, this practice was going to jump up and bite him in the ass. But as I drove toward the Ninth Ward, my natural paranoia kicked in and I began to question the wisdom of traipsing off into the middle of nowhere to hook up with a violent criminal.

Prior to Katrina, Abundance Square had been a housing project of old-style New Orleans town homes, with courtyards and balconies all painted in pastel shades. It had been completed not long before the hurricane struck. Now it was a waste of boarded-up homes and streets lined with people's possessions. Cars, beds, lamps, bureaus, TV sets, pianos, toys, and so on, every inch of them caked with dried mud. Though I was accustomed to such sights, that night it didn't look real. My headlights threw up bizarre images that made it appear I was driving through a post-apocalyptic version of Claymation Country. I found the address, parked a couple of blocks away, and walked back to the house. A drowned stink clotted my nostrils. In the distance, I heard sirens and industrial noise, but close at hand, it was so quiet you could hear a bug jump.

Huey answered my knock. He was a tall drink of water. Six-five, six-six, with a bluish polish to his black skin, a lean frame, pointy sideburns, and a modish goatee. He wore charcoal slacks and a high-collared camp shirt. Standing in the door, a nickel-plated .45 in hand, he might have been a bouncer at the Devil's strip club. He preceded me toward the rear of the

house, to a room lit by a kerosene lantern. At its center, one of Pellerin's bodyguards was tied to a wooden chair. His head was slumped onto his chest, his face and shirt bloody. The air seemed to grow hotter.

I balked at entering and Huey said, "What you scared of, man? Lord Vader there ain't going to harm you. Truth is, he gave it up quick for being a Jedi."

"Where's the other guy?" I asked.

"Man insisted on staying behind," Huey said.

I had a sinking feeling, a vision of the Red House at Angola, guards strapping me down for the injection. "Jesus Christ," I said. "You tell Billy I'm not going down for murder."

Huey caught me by the shoulder as I turned to leave and slammed me up against the wall. He bridged his forearm under my jaw, giving me the full benefit of his lavishly applied cologne, and said, "I didn't say a god-damn thing about murder, now did I?" When I remained silent, he asked me again and I squeezed out a no.

"I got things to take care of," he said, stepping back. "Probably take me two, three hours. Here go." He handed me the .45 and some keys. "You get on upstairs."

"Who's up there?"

"The card player and his woman. Some other guy. A doctor, he say."

"Are they . . ." I searched for a word that would not excite Huey. "Uninjured?"

"Yeah, they fine."

"And I'm supposed to keep watch, right? That's all?"

"Billy say for you to ask some questions."

"What about?"

"About what they up to."

"Well, what did he tell you?" I pointed at the bodyguard. "I need something to go on."

"Lord Vader wasn't too clear on the subject," said Huey. "Guess I worked him a little hard. But he did say the card player ain't a natural man."

Some rooms on the second floor of the townhouse were filled with stacked cots, folding tables and chairs, and with bottled water, canned food, toilet paper, and other supplies. It seemed that Billy was planning for the end times. In a room furnished with a second-hand sofa and easy chairs, I found Verret, Pellerin, and a man in his fifties with mussed gray hair and a hangdog look about the eyes. I assumed him to be Doctor Crain. He was gagged and bound to a chair. Verret and Pellerin were leg-shackled to the sofa. On seeing me, Crain arched his eyebrows and tried to speak. Pellerin glanced up from his hand of solitaire and Verret, dressed in freshly ironed jeans and a white T-shirt, gave me a sorrowful look, as if to suggest she had expected more of me.

"It's the night shift," Pellerin said and went back to turning over cards.

"Can you help us?" asked Verret.

"What's up with him?" I pointed at Crain with the gun.

"He annoyed our previous keeper." Pellerin flipped over an ace and made a satisfied noise. "He's an annoying fellow. You're catching him at his best."

"Can you help us?" Verret asked again, with emphasis.

"Probably not." I pulled a chair around and sat opposite the two of them. "But if you tell me what's going on with you, what's the relationship between the Darden Corporation and Tulane, the Ezawa project . . . I'll try to help."

Pellerin kept dealing, Verret gave no response, and Crain struggled with his bonds.

"Do you know where you are?" I asked. "Let me clue you in."

I told them who had ordered their kidnapping, mentioning the Alice Delvecchio incident along with a couple of others, then reiterated that I could probably be of no help to them—I was an unwilling participant in the process. I was sorry things had reached this pass, but if I was going to be any help at all, they ought to tell me what was up; otherwise, I couldn't advise them on how to survive Billy Pitch.

Verret looked to Pellerin, who said, "He ain't that damn sorry. Except where his own sorry ass is concerned."

"Is he telling the truth?" she asked.

"More or less."

Crain redoubled his efforts to escape, forcing muted shouts through his gag.

"I guess that's why you're so expert at the tables," I said to Pellerin. "You're good at reading people."

"You have no idea, Small Time," he said.

I wiggled the gun. "You're not in a position to be giving me attitude."

"You going to shoot me?" He gave a sneering laugh. "I don't think so. You're about ready to piss yourself just hanging onto that thing."

"Josey!" Verret started to stand, then remembered the shackles. "I'll tell you," she said to me. "But I'd rather do it in private."

Crain threw a convulsion fit, heaving himself about in his chair, attempting to spit out his gag.

"You see," she said. "He's going to act like that every time I tell you something. I have to use the restroom, anyway."

I undid the shackles, then I locked Crain and Pellerin in and escorted her down the hall, lagging behind a step so I could check out her butt. When she had finished in the john, we went into one of the storerooms. I set up a couple of folding chairs and we sat facing one another.

"May I have some water?" she asked.

"Help yourself."

She had a drink of water, then sat primly with the plastic bottle resting on one knee. I knew I had to watch myself with her—I'd always been a sucker for tall brunettes who had that lady thing going. She must have had a sense of this, because she worked it overtime.

"Here's what I know," I said. "The Ezawa project was investigating voodoo remedies. And Josey Pellerin, according to your bodyguard, is not a natural man. That suggests . . . well, I'm not sure. Why don't you just tell me everything?"

"Everything? That'll take a long time." She screwed the bottle cap on and off. "The project wasn't considered important at the outset. The only reason Ezawa got funding was because he was a golfing buddy of one of the trustees. And he *was* brilliant, so they were willing to give him some

leeway. He isolated a bacterium present in the dirt of old slave graveyards. He used dirt from the graveyard at the Myrtles—that old house over in Saint Francisville? The bodies were buried in biodegradable coffins, or no coffins at all, and the micro-organisms in the dirt had interacted with the decomposing tissues.”

She left room for me to ask a question, but I had none.

“A DNA extract from datura and other herbs was introduced into the growth medium,” she said. “Then the bacteria were induced to take up DNA and chromosomes from the extract, and Ezawa injected the recombinant strain into the cerebellum and temporal lobes of a freshly dead corpse. The bacteria began processing the corpse’s genetic complement and eventually the body was revived.”

“Whoa! Revivified?” I said. “You mean it came back to life?”

She nodded.

“How long were these people dead?” I asked.

“On the average, a little under an hour. The longest was about an hour and a half. The process required a certain amount of time, so the bodies had to be secured quickly.”

“Makes you wonder, doesn’t it? Getting the paperwork done for releasing a body generally takes more than an hour.”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Jesus. Ezawa was basically making zombies. High-tech zombies.”

She started, I presumed, to object, but I headed her off.

“Don’t bullshit me,” I said. “I grew up voodoo. Datura’s one of the classic ingredients in the old recipe books. I bet he tried goat’s rue, too . . . and Angel’s trumpet. The man was making zombies.”

She frowned. “What I was going to say was, the term was appropriate for most of the patients. They were weak. Helpless. They rarely survived longer than a day. But there were a few who lived longer. For months, some of them. We called them ‘slow-burners.’ We moved them out to a plantation house in bayou country and brought in a clinical psychologist to assess their new personalities. You see, the patients developed personalities markedly different from the ones they originally had. The psychologist, Doctor Edman, he believed these personalities manifested a kind of wish-fulfillment. His theory was that the process changed a portion of the RNA and made it dominant. ‘The bioform of their deepest wish,’ that’s how he put it. The patients manufactured memories. They recalled having different names, different histories. In effect, they were telling us—and themselves—a new life story, one in which they achieved their heart’s desire. The amazing thing was, they had abilities commensurate with these stories.”

I could have used some of Pellerin’s ability to read people. What she had told me had a ring of authenticity, but if I were to accept it as true, I would have to rearrange my notion of what was possible. I started to speak, but I was on shaky ground and wasn’t certain which questions to ask.

“It’s hard to believe,” she said. “But it’s the truth.” She let some seconds slip past and then, when I remained mute, as if she were trying to keep the conversation going, she went on: “I disagreed with Edman about a great many things. He demanded that we allow the patients to find their

own way. He believed we should let their stories come out naturally. But I thought if we prompted them some, if we reminded them of their original identities . . . I don't mean give them every detail, you understand. Just their names and a little background. That would have afforded them a stronger foundation and perhaps we wouldn't have had so many breakdowns among the slow-burners. These people were re-inventing themselves out of whole cloth. They were bound to be unstable. I was hoping Crain would agree with me, but . . ." She made a contemptuous gesture, then seemed to remember where she was. "Do you want to know anything else?"

I still was at a loss for words, but I managed to say, "So I'm guessing Pellerin's a slow-burner."

"Yes. He was born Theodore Rankin. He's forty-three. He believes he's the world's best poker player. And he may well be."

"What was he before?"

"A bartender. He was killed during a robbery. I don't know how the corporation got hold of the body."

"The corporation. I assume they took the project over after it went in the toilet at Tulane."

"That's right. But there was a gap of ten years or so."

"Why're they so interested in a poker player?"

"It's not the poker playing per se that's of interest, it's the patients' underlying abilities. Their potentials go far beyond the life story they construct for themselves. We don't understand what they can do. None of them lived long enough. But with the advances in microbiology made during the last two decades, Doctor Crain thinks Josey may live for years. He's developing more rapidly than the others, too. That may be a result of improvements in the delivery system. We used a heart pump at Tulane, but now they . . ."

"I don't have to know the gearhead stuff." I mulled over what she had told me. "You were fired from the original project. Why would Darden hire you? Where do you fit in?"

Verret toyed with the bottle cap. "I helped a patient escape. I couldn't go along with what they were doing to him anymore. He developed some astonishing abilities while he was on the run. I'm the only person who's dealt with someone that advanced."

"What sort of abilities we talking about?"

"Perceptual, for the most part. Changes in visual capacity and such."

She said this off-handedly, but I doubted she was being straight with me. I decided not to push it, and I asked what they had been doing at Harrah's.

"At Tulane we kept the patients confined," she said. "But Crain thought Josey would develop more rapidly if we exposed him to an unstructured environment under controlled conditions." She gave a rueful laugh. "Turns out we didn't have much control."

"How much does Pellerin know?"

"He knows he was brought back to life. But he doesn't know about the new personality . . . though he suspects something's wrong there. It's up to me to determine when he's ready to hear the truth. Things go better if we tell them than if we let them piece it together on their own."

"I still don't understand your function. What exactly is it you do?"

"Patients need to bond with someone in order to create a complex personality. They have to be controlled, carefully manipulated. We were trained to instill that bond, to draw out their capabilities."

She folded her arms, compressed her lips. I had the thought that, though none of what she had told me was comedy club material, talking about her role in things distressed her more than the rest.

"If the other therapists are as good-looking as you," I said, "I bet that instilling thing goes pretty easily."

That seemed to distress her further.

"Come on, cher," I said. "You going to be just fine. Y'all can be a significant asset for Billy, and that works to your advantage."

She leaned forward, putting a hand on my knee; the touch surprised me. "Mister Lamb," she said, and I said, without intending to, "Jack. You can call me Jack."

"I want to be able to count on you, Jack. Can I count on you?"

"I told you I don't have any control over the situation."

"But can you be a friend? That's all I'm asking. Can we count on you to be a friend?"

Those big brown eyes were doing a job on me, but I resisted them. "I haven't ever been much good as a friend. It's a character flaw, I'm afraid."

"I don't believe that." She sat back, adjusting her T-shirt so it fit more snugly. "You can call me Jo."

I contacted Billy Pitch, though not during prime time, fearing I might interrupt *The Surreal Life* or *Wife Swap*, and I told him what I had learned, omitting any mention of the "remarkable powers" that might soon be Pellerin's, stressing instead his developing visual capacity. I wasn't sure why I did this—perhaps because I thought that Billy, already powerful, needed no further inducement to use his strength intemperately. He professed amazement at what I had to say, then slipped into business mode.

"I got an idea, but it needs to simmer, so I'm going to stash you away for a while," he said. "Get everybody ready to travel tonight."

"By 'everybody,'" I said, "you don't mean me, right? I got deals cooking. I have to . . ."

"I'll handle them for you."

"Billy, some of what I got going requires the personal touch."

"Are you suggesting I can't handle whatever piddly business it is you got?"

"No, that's not it. But there's . . ."

"You're not going to thwart me in this, are you, Jack?"

"No," I said helplessly.

"Good! Call my secretary and tell her what needs doing. I'll see it gets done."

That night we were flown by private jet to an airstrip in South Florida, and then transported by cigarette boat to Billy's estate in the Keys. Absent from our party was Dr. Crain. I never got to know the man. Each time I walked him to the john or gave him food, he railed at me, saying that I didn't know who I was dealing with, I didn't understand what was involved, causing such a ruckus that I found it easier to keep him bound

and gagged in a separate room. I warned him that he was doing himself no good acting this way, yet all he did was tell me again I didn't know who I was dealing with and threaten me with corporate reprisals. When it was time to leave, I started to untie him, but Huey dropped a hand onto my shoulder and said, "Billy say to let him be."

"He's a doctor," I said. "He's the only one knows what's going on. What if Pellerin gets sick or something?"

"Billy say let him be."

I tried to call Billy, but was met with a series of rebuffs from men as constricted by the literal limits of their orders as Huey. Their basic message was, "Billy can't be disturbed." Crain's eyes were wide, fixed on me; his nostrils flared above the gag when he tried to speak. I made to remove it, but Huey once again stayed my hand.

"Let him talk," I said. "He might . . ."

"What he going to say, Jack?" Huey's glum, wicked face gazed down at me. "You know there ain't nothing to say?"

He steered me into the corridor, closed the door behind us and leaned against it. "Get a move on," he said. "Ain't nothing you can do, so you might as well not think about it."

Yet I did think about it as I descended the stair and walked along the corridor and out into the drizzly New Orleans night. I thought about Crain waiting in that stuffy little room, about whether or not he knew what was coming, and I thought that if I didn't change the way things were headed, I might soon be enduring a similar wait myself.

Some weeks later, I watched a videotape that captured Jo's interaction with one of the short-lived zombies whose passage from death to life and back again she had overseen at Tulane. By then, I had become thoroughly acquainted with Pellerin and the zombie on the tape didn't interest me nearly as much as Jo's performance. She tempted and teased his story out of him with the gestures and movements of a sexier-than-average ballerina, exaggerated so as to make an impression on the man's dim vision, and I came to realize that all of her movements possessed an element of this same controlled grace. Whether she was doing this by design, I had no clue; by that time I had tumbled to the fact that she was a woman who hid much from herself, and I doubted that she would be able to shed light on the matter.

Over the space of a month, Pellerin grew from a man whom I had mistaken for dead money into a formidable presence. He was stronger, more vital in every way, and he began to generate what I can only describe as a certain magnetism—I felt the back of my neck prickle whenever he came near, though the effect diminished over the days and weeks that followed. And then there were his eyes. On the same day I interrogated Jo, I was escorting him to the john when he said, "Hey, check this out, Small Time!" He snatched off his sunglasses and brought his eyes close to mine. I was about to make a sarcastic remark, when I noticed a green flickering in his irises.

"What the fuck!" I said.

Pellerin grinned. "Looks like a little ol' storm back in there, doesn't it?"

I asked him what it was and he told me the flickers, etched in an electric green, signaled the bacteria impinging on the optic nerve.

"They're bioluminescent," he said. "Weird, huh? Jocundra says it's going to get worse before it gets better. People are going to think I'm the goddamn Green Lantern."

Though he had changed considerably since that day, his attitudes toward almost everyone around him remained consistently negative—he was blunt, condescending, an arrogant smart-ass. Yet toward Jo, his basic stance did change. He grew less submissive and often would challenge her authority. She adapted by becoming more compliant, but I could see that she wasn't happy, that his contentiousness was getting to her. She still was able to control him by means of subtle and not-so-subtle manipulation, but how long that control would last was a matter for conjecture.

The island where we were kept was Billy's private preserve. It was shaped roughly like a T, having two thin strips of land extending out in opposite directions from the west end. Billy's compound took up most of the available space. Within a high white brick wall topped by razor wire were a pool, outbuildings (including a gym and eight bungalows), a helicopter pad, and a sprawling Florida-style ranch house that might have been designed by an architect with a Lego fetish—wings diverged off the central structure and off each other at angles such as a child might employ, and I guessed that from the air it must resemble half a crossword puzzle. There were flat screen TVs in every room, even the johns, and all the rooms were decorated in a fashion that I labeled *haute mafia*. The dining room table was fashioned from a fourteenth century monastery door lifted from some European ruin. The rugs were a motley assortment of modern and antique. Some of the windows were stained glass relics, while others were jalousies; but since heavy drapes were drawn across them, whatever effect had been intended was lost. Every room was home to a variety of antiquities: Egyptian statuary, Greek amphorae, Venetian glassware, German tapestries, and so on. In my bathroom, the toilet was carved from a single block of marble, and mounted on the wall facing it, a section of a Persian bas-relief, was yet another flat screen. It was as if someone with the sensibility of a magpie had looted the world's museums in order to furnish the place, and yet the decor was so uniformly haphazard, I had the impression that Billy was making an anti-fashion statement, sneering at the concept of taste. Elvis would have approved. In fact, had he seen the entirety of Billy's house, he would have returned home to Graceland and redecorated.

Beyond the wall was jungly growth that hid the house completely. The beach was a crescent of tawny sand fringed by palms and hibiscus shrubs and Spanish bayonet, protected by an underwater fence. A bunker-like guard house stood at the foot of the concrete pier to which the cigarette boat was moored, and a multicultural force (Cuban, white, African-American) patrolled within and without the walls. The guards, along with gardeners and maids, were housed in the bungalows, but they entered the house frequently to check on us. If we stepped outside they would dog us, their weapons shouldered, keeping a distance, alert to our every movement. It was easier to find privacy inside the house. Relative privacy, at any rate. Knowing Billy, I was certain that the rooms were bugged, and I had given up on the idea that I could keep anything from him. Whenever

Pellerin and Jo were closeted in their rooms, I would walk along corridors populated by suits of armor and ninja costumes fitted to basketwork men and gilt French chairs that, with their curved legs and positioned between such martial figures, looked poised for an attack. I would poke into rooms, examine their collection of *objets d'art*, uniformly mismatched, yet priceless. Sometimes I would wonder if I dared slip one or two small items into my pocket, but most of my thoughts were less concerned with gain than with my forlorn prospects for survival.

Occasionally in the course of these forays, I would encounter a maid, but never anyone else, and thus I was surprised one afternoon when, upon entering a room in the northernmost wing with a four-poster bed and a fortune in gee-gaws littering the tables and bureaus, I saw Jo standing by the entrance to a walk-in closet, inspecting the dresses within. She gave a start when I spoke her name, then offered a wan smile and said, "Hello."

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"Browsing." She touched the bodice of a green silk dress. "These clothes must have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. They're all designer originals."

"No, I meant aren't you supposed to be with Pellerin."

"I need breaks from Josey," she said. "His intensity gets to me after awhile. And he's getting more independent, he wants time to himself. So . . ." She shrugged. "I like to come here and look at the clothes."

She stepped into the closet and I moved into the room so I could keep her in view.

"He must bring a lot of women here," she said. "He's got every imaginable size."

"It's hard for me to think of Billy as a sexual being."

"Why's that?"

"You'd have to know him. I've never seen him with a woman on his arm, but I suppose he has his moments."

She went deeper into the closet, toyed with the hem of a dress that bore a pattern like a moth's wing, all soft grays and greens, a touch of brown.

I perched on the edge of the bed. "Why don't you try it on?"

"Do you think he'd mind?" she asked.

"Go for it."

She hesitated, then said, "I'll just be a second," and closed the closet door.

The idea that she was getting naked behind the door inspired a salacious thought or two—I was already more than a little smitten. When she came out, she was barefoot. She did a pirouette and struck a fashion magazine pose. I was dumbstruck. The dress was nearly diaphanous, made of some feathery stuff that clung to her hips and flat stomach and breasts, the flared skirt reaching to mid-thigh.

"You like?" she asked. "It's a little short on me."

"I didn't notice."

She laughed delightedly and went for another spin. "I could never afford this. Not that I care all that much about clothes. But if I had a couple of million, I'd probably indulge."

Shortly thereafter she went back inside the closet, re-emerging wearing her jeans and a nondescript top. It seemed that she had exchanged

personalities as well as clothes, for she was once again somber and downcast. "I've got to get back," she said.

"So soon?"

She stopped by the door. "I come here most days about this time," she said. "A little earlier, actually." Then, after a pause, she added, "It's nice having someone to wear clothes for."

We started meeting every day in that room. It was plain that she was flirting with me, and I imagine it was equally plain that I was interested, but it went on for over a month and neither one of us made a move. For my part, the fear of rejection didn't enter in. I was used to the man-woman thing being a simple negotiation—you either did the deed or you took a pass—but I thought if I did make a move, I might frighten her off, that she needed to feel in control. If I had been free of constraint, my own agent, I might have given up on her . . . or maybe I wouldn't have. She was the kind of woman who required a period of courtship, who enjoyed the dance as much as the feast, and she caused you to enjoy it as well. Basically an unhappy soul, she gave the impression of being someone who had been toughened by trouble in her life; but whenever she was happy, there was something so frail and girlish about the mood, I believed the least disturbance could shatter it. I grew more entranced by her and more frustrated day by day, but I told myself that not getting involved was for the best—I needed to keep clear of emotional entanglements and concentrate on how to stay alive once Billy came back into the picture. That didn't prevent me, however, from exploring certain of her fantasies.

I knew that she had been married when she was a teenager and one morning while we sat on the bed, her cross-legged at the head and me sort of side-saddle at the foot, I asked her about it. She ran a finger along a newel post, tracing the pattern carved into it, and said, "It was just . . . foolishness. We thought it would be romantic to get married."

"I take it it wasn't."

She gave a wan laugh. "No."

"Would you ever do it again?"

"Marry? I don't know. Maybe." She smiled. "Why? Are you asking?"

"Maybe. Tell me what type of man it is you'd marry. Let's see if I fit the bill."

She lay down on her side, her legs drawn up, and considered the question.

"Yeah?" I said.

"You're serious? You want me to do this?"

"Let's hear it, cher. Your ideal man."

"Well . . ." She sat up, fluffed the pillow, and lay down again. "I'd want him to have lots of money, so maybe a financier. Not a banker or anything boring like that. A corporate tiger. Someone who would take over a failing company and reshape it into something vital."

"Money's the most important qualification?"

"Not really, but you asked for my ideal and money makes things easier."

She had on a blouse with a high collar and, as often happened when thinking, she tucked in her chin and nibbled the edge of the collar. I found the habit sexy and, whenever she did it, I wanted to touch her face.

"He'd be a philanthropist," she said. "And not just as a tax dodge. He'd have to be devoted to it. And he'd have an introspective side. I'd want him to know himself. To understand himself."

"A corporate raider with soul. Isn't that a contradiction?"

"It can happen. Wallace Stevens was an insurance executive and a great poet."

"I like to think of myself as an entrepreneur when I'm feeling spunky. That's like a financier, but I'm getting that we're talking about two different animals."

"You've got possibilities," she said, and smiled. "You just need molding."

"How about in the looks department?" I asked. "Something George Clooney-ish? Or Brad Pitt?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Movie stars are too short. Looks aren't important, anyway."

"Women all say that, but it's bullshit."

"It's true! Women have the same kind of daydreams as men, but when it comes to choosing a man they often base their choices on different criteria."

"Like money."

"No! Like how someone makes you feel. It's not quantifiable. I would never have thought I could . . ."

She broke off, thinning her lips.

"You would never have thought what?"

"This is silly," she said. "I should check on Josey."

"You never would have thought you could be attracted to someone you met at gunpoint?"

She sat up, swung her legs off the side of the bed, but said nothing.

"You might as well confess, cher," I said. "You won't be giving away any secrets."

She stiffened, as if she were going to lash out at me, but the tension drained from her body. "It's the Stockholm Syndrome," she said.

"You reckon that's it? We are for sure stuck on this damn island, and there's not a whole lot to distract us. And technically I am an accomplice in your kidnapping. But there's more to it than that."

"You're probably right," she said, coming to her feet. "If we'd met on our own in New Orleans, I'd probably have been attracted to you. But that's neither here nor there."

"Why not? Because Pellerin's your priority?"

She shrugged as if to say yes.

"Duty won't keep you warm at night," I said.

"Keeping warm has never been my biggest goal in life," she said with brittle precision. "But should that change, I'll be sure to let you know."

I didn't go outside much. The guards made me nervous. When I did it was usually to have a swim, but some nights I went along the shore through a fringe of shrubs and palms to the west end, the crosspiece of the T, a place from which, if the weather were clear, I could make out the lights on a nearby Key. And on one such night, emerging from dense undergrowth onto a shingle of crushed coral and sand, littered with vegetable debris, I spotted a

shadow kneeling on the beach. Wavelets slapping against the shingle covered the sound of my approach and I saw it was Pellerin. I hadn't realized he could walk this far without help. He was holding a hand out above the water, flexing his fingers. It looked as if he were about to snatch something up. Beneath his hand the water seethed and little waves rolled away from shore. It was such a mediocre miracle, I scarcely registered it at first; but then I realized that he must be causing this phenomenon, generating a force that pushed the waves in a contrary direction. He turned his head toward me. The green flickers in his eyes stood out sharply in the darkness. A tendril of fear uncoiled in my backbrain.

"What's shaking, Small Time?" he said.

"Don't call me that. I'm sick of it."

He made a soft, coughing noise that I took for a laugh. "Want me to do like Jocundra and call you Jackie boy?"

"Just don't call me Small Time."

"But it suits you so well."

"You been through a rough time," I said. "And I can appreciate that. But that doesn't give you the right to act like an asshole."

"It doesn't? I could have sworn it did."

He came to his feet, lost his balance. I caught him by the shirtfront and hauled him erect. He tried to break my grip, but he was still weak and I held firm. He had a soapy smell. I wondered if Jo had to help him bathe.

"Let me go," he said.

"I don't believe I will."

"Give me another month or two, I promise I'll tear you down to your shoelaces, boy."

"I'll be waiting."

"Let me go!"

He pawed at my hand and I let loose of the shirt. That electric green danced in his eyes again.

"Pears you growing a pair. Love must be making you bold." He hitched up his belt. "Yeah, I been catching you looking at Jocundra. She looks at you the same. If I wasn't around, the two of you be going at it. But I *am* around."

"Maybe not for too long," I said.

"I might surprise you, boy. But whatever. As long as I'm here, Jocundra not going to stray. She's just dying for me to tell her about every new thing I see. She finds it fascinating."

"What do you see?"

"I'm not telling you, pal. I'm saving all of my secrets for sweet cheeks." He took a faltering step toward the house. "How's about we make a little side bet? Bet I nail her before you."

I gave him a shove and he went over onto his back, crying out in shock. A guard stepped from the shadow of the trees—I told him to be cool, I had things covered. I reached down and seized hold of Pellerin's arm, but he wrenched free.

"You want to lie there, fine by me," I said, and started back along the shore.

He called to me, but I kept walking.

"Know what I see in your future, Small Time?" he shouted as I passed into the trees. "I see lilies and a cardboard casket. I see a black dog taking a piss on your grave."

What he said didn't trouble me, but I was troubled nonetheless. When I had reached for his arm, I had brushed the fingers of his right hand, the same hand that he'd been holding above the water. I wouldn't have sworn to it, but it seemed that his fingertips had been hot. Not just warm. Burning hot. As if they'd been dipped into a bowl of fire.

If pressed to do so, I might have acknowledged Jo's right to value her duties, but I was unreasonably angry at her. Angry and petulant. I kept to my room for a day and a half after that night on the beach, lying around in my boxers and doing some serious drinking, contemplating the notion that I was involved in a romantic triangle with a member of the undead. On the morning of the second day, I realized that I was only hurting myself and had a shower, changed my shorts. Still a little drunk, I was debating whether or not to see what was up in the rest of the house, when someone knocked on my door. Without thinking, I said, "Yeah, come in," and Jo walked into the room. I thought about making a grab for my trousers, but I was unsteady on my feet and feared that I'd stumble and fall on my ass; so I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to act nonchalant.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Peachy," I said.

She hesitated, then shut the door and took a seat in a carved wooden chair that likely had been some dead king's throne. "You don't look peachy," she said.

I'd cracked the drapes to check on the weather and light fell directly on her—she was the only bright thing in a room full of shadow. "I had a few drinks," I told her. "Drowning my sorrows. But I'm pulling it together."

She nodded, familiar with the condition.

"How come you didn't tell me your boy could do tricks?" I asked.

"Josey? What are you talking about?"

I told her what Pellerin had been doing with the ocean water and she said she hadn't realized he had reached that stage. She hopped up from the chair, saying she had to talk to him.

"Stay," I said. "Come on. You got all day to do with him. Just stay a while, okay?"

Reluctantly, she sat back down.

"So," I said. "You want to tell me what that is he was doing."

"My previous patient developed the ability to manipulate electromagnetic fields. He did some remarkable things. It sounds as if Josey's doing the same."

"You keep saying that. Remarkable how? Give me an example."

"He cured the sick, for one."

"Did he, now?"

"I swear, it's the truth. There was a man with terminal cancer. He cured him. It took him three days and cost him a lot of effort, but afterward the man was cancer-free."

"He cured a guy of cancer by . . . what? Working his electromagnetic fields?"

"I think so. I don't know for sure. Whatever he did, it produced a lot of heat." She crossed her legs, yielding up a sigh. "I wish it had stopped with that."

I asked what had happened.

"It's too long a story to tell, but the upshot was, he built a *veve* . . . Do you know what a *veve* is?"

"The things they draw on the floors of voodoo temples? Little patterns?"

"That's them. They relate to the voodoo gods, the *loas*." She flicked a speck of something off her knee. "Donnell . . . my patient. He built the *veve* of Ogoun Badagris out of copper. Several tons of copper. It was immense. He said it enabled him to focus energy. He used to walk around on top of it and . . . one day there was an explosion." She made a helpless gesture. "I don't understand what happened."

Neither did I understand. I couldn't wrap my brain around the idea that Pellerin might be some kind of green-eyed Jesus; yet I didn't believe she was lying.

"What do you think was going on with him?" I asked. "With Pellerin. I mean, what's your theory? You must have a theory."

"You want to hear? I've been told it's pretty out there."

"Yeah, and nothing about this is out there, so your theory's got to be way off base."

She laughed. "Okay. The bacteria we injected into Josey was the same strain we used at Tulane. All the slow-burners have reproduced those designs in one way or another. It's as if they're expressing the various aspects of Ogoun. Doctor Crain's theory was that because the bacteria eventually infested the entire brain, the patients used more of their brains than normal people—this resulted in what seemed to be miraculous powers. And since the bacterial strain was the same, it prevailed upon the host brain to acquire similar characteristics. That makes a certain amount of sense as far as it goes, but Crain was trying to explain voodoo in terms of science, and some of it can't be explained except in voodoo terms."

She paused, as if to gather her thoughts. "Someday we may discover a biochemical factor that makes the patients prone to seeing the *veve* patterns. But we'll never be able to explain away all the mystery surrounding Ezawa's work. I think he discovered the microbiological analogue of possession. In a voodoo ceremony, a possession occurs quickly. The god takes over your body while you're dancing or having a drink. You jerk around as the god acclimates to the flesh, and then you begin acting like that god. With the bacteria, it takes longer and the transition's smoother. You notice a growing awareness in the patients that they're different. Not just because they've come back from the dead. The real difference lies in the things they see and feel. They sense there's something qualitatively different about themselves. They recognize that they have their own agendas. They grow beyond their life stories the way Jesus and Buddha outgrew the parameters of their lives. Things Donnell said . . . they led me to believe that the bacteria allowed them to access their *gro bon ange*. Do you know the term? The immortal portion of the soul? According to voodoo, anyway. And that in turn opened them to the divine. As the bacterial infestation increased, they became more open. The slow-burners all demonstrated behavioral arcs that fit the theory. I guess it sounds crazy, but no one's come up with anything better."

She seemed to be waiting for me to speak.

"You're right," I said. "That's out there."

"Donnell was seeing these peculiar shadows before he died. I think he was seeing people's souls. I can't come close to proving it, of course, but there were things he told me. . . ." She sighed in exasperation. "I begged Crain to let me work with Josey my way. I thought if I started from a position of intimacy, we could forge a bond strong enough to endure until the end. We'd see the maturation of the new personality. If my theory's right, we'd have a captive god fully integrated with a human personality. Whatever a god is. That might be something we could determine. Who knows what's possible?" The energy drained from her voice and her tone softened. "As things stand I doubt we'll ever get any further than I got with Donnell. He should have been given the space to evolve, but all they did was harass him."

"I'm getting you liked this Donnell," I said.

Her face sharpened. "Yes."

"How about Pellerin?"

"He's not very likeable. Part of it is, he's afraid of everything. Confused. He doesn't know yet who or what he is. He may never know. So he tends to be angry at everyone. That said, he's coarse, he's truculent and difficult to be around." She made a sad face and pushed up from her throne. "I wish I didn't have to go, but I should get back to him."

"Jo?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Remember when you asked if you could count on me as a friend? For what it's worth . . ."

"I know," she said, coming toward me.

"We've been forced onto the same side, but . . ."

She embraced me, pulling my head down onto her shoulder. I breathed in her warm, clean smell, and kissed her neck. She tensed, but I nuzzled her neck, her throat, and she let her head fall back. When I kissed her on the mouth, she kissed me back, fully complicit, and, before long, we were rolling around on the bed. I worked her T-shirt up around her neck and had disengaged the catch of her bra, a hook located under a flare of white lace between the cups, when I realized that, although she was not resisting, neither was she helping out as she had a moment earlier. I slid my hand under the bra, but she remained motionless, reactionless, and I asked what was the matter.

"I can't cope with this. You're the first man I've been attracted to in a long time. A very long time." She adopted an injured expression, like the one a child might display on running up against a rule that denied it a treat. "I want to make love with you, but I can't."

My hand was still on her breast and desire crowded all coherent thought from my head.

"Say something." She shifted, turning on her side, and my hand was no longer happy.

"Does this have anything to do with Pellerin?"

"Partly."

"You're sleeping with him?"

"No, but I might have to. It may be the only way to control him."

"Is that how you controlled Donnell?"

"It wasn't like that! I was in love with him."

"You loved him."

"I know it sounds strange, but I was . . ."

I experienced a flash of anger. "It sounds twisted."

She froze.

"You ever think," I said, "you might have a kink for dead guys?"

She held my eyes for a second, then sat up, rehooked her bra and tugged down her T-shirt.

"Maybe I do," she said. "Maybe I find them a vast improvement."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean that. I was just . . ."

"What did you mean?"

"It was frustration talking."

"Don't you think I'm frustrated, too? I could probably find an insult to toss at you if I wanted."

I could have pointed out that she was the cause of her own frustration, but I'd already dug myself a hole and saw no good reason to pull the dirt down on top of me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I truly am."

"It's not important," she said icily. "I've heard it before."

She flung herself off the bed.

"Jo," I said despairingly.

"Oh," she said, stopping in the doorway. "I nearly forgot. Your employer has a message for you. He'll be arriving in three days. Maybe you'll find his company less perverse than mine."

I wasn't accustomed to viewing myself as an employee, and it took me a hiccup to translate the term "your employer" into the name Billy Pitch. I'd been anticipating his arrival, but the news was a shock nonetheless. My dalliance with Jo, brief and unsatisfying as it was, had placed our time on the island in the context of a courtship, and I needed to reorder my priorities. I knew I had to tell Billy everything—he had likely already heard it and our first conversation would be a test of my loyalty—and I would have to put some distance between Jo and me. You might have thought this would be an easy chore, given the state of the relationship, yet I was down the rabbit hole with her, past the point where longing and desire could be disciplined. Even my most self-involved thoughts were tinged with her colors.

Like advance men for pharaoh, Billy Pitch's retinue arrived before him. Security people, chef, barber, bed fluffer, and various other functionaries filtered into the compound over the next day and a half. A seaplane brought in Billy the following morning and, after freshening up, accompanied by an enormous bodyguard with the coarse features of an acromegalic giant, he swept into the foyer of the main wing, the most grotesquely decorated room of all, dominated by a fountain transplanted from nineteenth century Italy, with floors covered by pink and purple linoleum and vinyl furniture to match. It had been over a year since I had seen Billy in the flesh, but I had known him for almost a decade and he had always seemed ageless in a measly, unprepossessing way—I was thus pleased to note a pair of bifocals hanging about his neck and that his fringe of hair was turning gray. He

wore a garish cabana set that left his bony knees and skinny forearms bare. The outfit looked ridiculous, but amplified his air of insectile menace. He directed a cursory glance toward Pellerin, sitting on a plum-colored sofa, but his gaze lingered on Jo, who stood behind him.

"My, my! Aren't you the sweet thing?" Billy wagged a forefinger at her. "Who's she remind me of, Clayton?"

The bodyguard, a mighty android in a blue silk T-shirt and white linen jacket, rumbled that he couldn't say, but she did look familiar.

"It'll come to me." He tipped his head pertly to one side and said to me, "Let's talk."

He led me into a room containing a functional modern desk and chairs and one of the ubiquitous flat screens, where I delivered my report. When I had done, he said, "Good job. Very good job." He drummed his fingers on the desk. "Do you believe her? You think that boy is a miracle worker? Or you think maybe that girl in there's gone crazy?"

"It sounds crazy," I said. "But everything I've seen so far backs her up."

He nodded like he wasn't so much agreeing with me, but rather was mulling something over. "Let me show you a piece of tape I landed. Part of the Ezawa project at Tulane. The sound's no good, but the picture speaks volumes."

He switched on the TV and the tape began to play. The original of the tape had been a piece of film. It had an old-fashioned countdown—10, 9, 8, etc.—and then the tape went white, flickered, and settled into a grainy color shot of an orderly removing electrodes from the chest of man wearing a hospital gown. He appeared to be semi-conscious and was sitting in a wheelchair. Rail-thin, with scraggly dark hair and rawboned hillbilly face. A woman in a nurse's uniform came into view, her back to the camera, and there was a blurt of sound. The legend "Tucker Mayhew" was briefly superimposed over the picture. Another blurt of sound, the woman speaking to the orderly, who left the room. Then the woman moved behind the wheelchair and I saw it was a younger, less buxom Jo, her make-up so liberally applied as to seem almost grotesque.

Billy asked why the heavy make-up and I replied, "She said they don't see very well at first. Must be to help with that."

Jo began to touch the man's shoulders and neck. Initially he was unresponsive, but soon the touches came to act like shocks on him, though he was still out of it. He twitched and stiffened as if being jabbed with needles. His eyelids fluttered open and his eyes showed green flashes, already brighter than Pellerin's.

"The part where she's touching him went on longer," Billy said. "I had it edited down."

The man's eyes opened. Jo left off touching him and moved away. He gaped, glanced around, his face a parody of loss. Jo spoke to him and he located her again. The change in his expression, from woebegone to gratified, was so abrupt as to be laughable. The sound came and went in spurts, and what I could hear was garbled, but I caught enough to know she was teasing out his life story, one he was inventing in order to please her, one that fit the absence in his mind. His eyes tracked her as she performed movements that in their grace and ritual elegance reminded me

of Balinese dancers, yet had something as well of the blatant sexuality of bartop strippers you see in clubs on the edge of the Quarter. She passed behind the wheelchair and again touched him on the back of the neck.

Billy paused the tape. "There. Look at that."

The man had his head back and mouth open, searching for Jo, and she was about to touch him again, her long fingers extended toward the nape of his neck. Her smile was, I thought, unreadable, yet the longer I stared at it, the more self-satisfied it seemed. The image trembled slightly.

"Anybody doing that job is going to look bad from time to time." I said.

"But that's the job she does, honey," Billy said. "You can't get around that." He unpaused the tape and muted the sound. "Know what it puts me in mind of? Those women who marry men on death row. It's all about being in control for them. They control the visits, letters . . . everything. They don't have to have sex, yet they have all the emotional content of a real relationship and none of the fuss. And it's got a built-in expiration date. It's a hell of a deal, really. Of course our Miz Verret, she took it farther than most."

A jump in the film, another edit. The man's eyes blazed a fiery green that appeared to overflow his sockets. His coordination had improved, he made coherent gestures and talked non-stop. He struggled to stand and nearly succeeded. Then, after making an obviously impassioned statement, he fell back, dead for the second time. Jo stood beside the body for almost a minute before closing his eyes. A faint radiance shone through the lids. An orderly removed the body as Jo made notes on a clipboard. The screen whited out and another countdown started. Billy switched off the TV.

"Forty-seven minutes," he said. "Scratch one zombie. You got to be careful around that girl."

"Billy, I was . . ."

"I know. You were trying to get a little. But I'd hate to see you screw this up over a piece of ass." His voice acquired a pinched nastiness. "Especially since the bitch is such a freak!" He peered at me over the top of his glasses, as if assessing the impact of his words. He sighed. "Let's go have a chat with them, shall we?"

We went back into the living room. Clayton and the other bodyguard stood at ease. Billy took a chair opposite the sofa where Pellerin was sitting and I hovered at his shoulder. Behind Pellerin, Jo tried to make eye contact with me, but I pretended not to notice.

"Mister Pellerin," said Billy. "I have a question for you."

Pellerin looked at me and said, "This dab of cream cheese is the badass you warned us about?"

"Clayton?" said Billy. "Would you mind?"

Two strides carried Clayton to the sofa. He backhanded Pellerin viciously, knocking his sunglasses off. Jo shrieked and Clayton stood poised to deliver another blow.

"In the stomach," Billy said.

Clayton drove his fist into Pellerin's belly, and Billy signaled him to step back. Jo hurried around the couch to minister to Pellerin, who was trying to breathe, bleeding from a cut on his cheek.

"I'm not a very good businessman," said Billy sadly. "I let things get personal. I miss out on a lot of opportunities that way, but I've learned if you

can't have fun with an enterprise, it's best to cut your losses. Do you need a moment, Mister Pellerin?"

"You could have killed him!" Jo said, glancing up from Pellerin.

"Precisely." Billy church-and-steepled his fingers. "Your boy there's a valuable commodity, yet because of my intemperate nature I might have done the unthinkable. Do we understand each other? Mister Pellerin?"

Pellerin made a stressed yet affirmative noise.

"Good. Now . . . my question. Is your ability such that you can control the play of seven or eight good card players so as to achieve a specific result?"

With considerable effort, holding his belly, Pellerin sat up. "How specific?"

"I'd like you to arrange it so that you and a certain gentleman outlast all the rest, and that he have a distinct advantage in chips at that point. Let's say a four to one advantage. Then I'd like you to beat him silly. Take all his chips as quickly as you can."

"That's risky," said Pellerin. "The guy could get a run of great cards. It's hard playing heads-up from that far down. You can't bluff effectively. Why do you want me to do it that way? If you let me play my game, I can guarantee a win."

"Because he'll want the game to continue if he thinks you lucked out. He'll offer you a check, but you tell him it's cash or nothing."

"What if he . . ." Pellerin began, and Billy cut him off: "No what-ifs. Yours not to wonder why, yours but to do or die." He looked to Clayton. "Is that Byron?"

"Tennyson," said Clayton. "The Charge of the Light Brigade."

"Yes, of course!" He gave himself a pretend-slap for having forgotten.

"Well. Can you do the job, Mister Pellerin?"

"I'll need a little luck, but . . . yeah. I guess I can do it."

"We all need a little luck." Billy popped out of the chair. "You'll be leaving for Fort Lauderdale day after tomorrow. The Seminole Paradise Casino. I'll have my people watching, so don't worry about anything untoward. You will be closely watched. I'll give Jack the details. He can tell you all about it."

He walked away briskly, but then he turned and pointed at Jo. "I got it! *Big Brother All-Stars*. The seventh season. You remember, Clayton?"

Clayton said, maybe, he wasn't sure.

"Come on, man! Erica. The tall bitch with the big rack. She played the game real sneaky."

"Oh, yeah," said Clayton. "Yeah, I can see it."

The Seminole Paradise Hard Rock Hotel and Casino was a hell of a mouthful for what amounted to your basic two-hundred-dollar-per-room Florida hotel complete with fountain display and an assortment of clubs and bars notable for the indifferent quality of their cuisine and the bad taste evident in their decor. Particularly annoying was Pangaea, a club decorated with "authentic tribal artifacts" that likely had been purchased from a prop supply company. The entire complex was a surfeit of fakes. Fake breasts, fake smiles, fake youth, fake people. Why anyone would choose such a place to put a dent in their credit cards, I'll never know—maybe it offered them the illusion that they were losing fake money.

We went down to the casino early the same afternoon we checked in, and Pellerin nabbed a chair at one of the poker tables. I watched for a while to ascertain whether he was winning—he was—and went for a stroll. I wanted to see how far my leash would stretch. There were several men hanging about who might be Billy's people and I was interested to learn if any of them would follow me. I also wanted to get clear of the situation and gain some perspective on things. Once I reached the entrance to the grounds, I turned right and walked along the edge of the highway, working up a sweat in the hot sun, until I came to a strip mall with about twenty-five or thirty shops, the majority of them closed. It was Sunday in the real world.

A Baskin-Robbins caught my eye. The featured flavors were banana daiquiri and sangria. Sangria, for fuck's sake! I bought two scoops of vanilla by way of protesting the lapsed integrity of ice cream flavors and ate it sitting on the curb. I tried to problem-solve, but all I did was churn up mud from the bottom of my brain. The assignment that had been forced upon us—upon Pellerin—was to attract the interest of a wealthy developer named Frank Ruddle, an excellent poker player who frequented the Seminole Paradise. Pellerin's job was to play sloppy over the course of a couple of weeks. That way he would set himself up as a mark and Ruddle would invite him to the big cash game held each month at his Lauderdale home. According to Billy's scenario, once Ruddle went bust, he would feel compelled to open his vault in order to obtain more cash. At this point Billy's people would move in on the game. He wanted something from that vault. I thought it might be more of a trophy than anything of actual value, and that his real goal was purely personal. The plan was paper-thin and smacked of Billy at his most profligate. There were a dozen holes in it, a hundred ways it could go wrong, but Billy was willing to spend our lives for the chance to gain a petty victory. Had the aim of the exercise been to secure the item at any cost, it could have been far more easily achieved. That he was willing to squander an asset with (if Jo were to be believed) unlimited potential was classic late-period Billy Pitch. If we failed, it was no skin off his butt. He'd wait for his next opportunity and while away the hours throwing Tanqueray parties for his fellow reality-show addicts. And if we succeeded, he might decide that his victory would not be secure so long as we were alive. I saw a couple of outs, but the odds of them working were not good.

Across from the mall lay a vacant lot overgrown with weeds, sprinkled with scrub palmetto, and adjoining it was another, larger lot that had been cleared for construction, the future site of LuRay Condominiums—so read a sign picturing a peppy senior citizen couple who seemed as pleased as all get out that they would soon be living next door to a casino where they could blow their retirement in a single evening. Farther along was a cluster of tiny redneck dwellings set among diseased-looking palms. Squatty frame houses with shingle roofs and window-unit air conditioners and front yards littered with sun-bleached Big Wheels and swing sets. They looked deserted, but each of them harbored, I imagined, a vast corpulent entity with dyed hair and swollen ankles, who survived on a diet of game shows and carbohydrates, and went outside once a day to check the sky for signs of the Rapture. Now and then a car zipped past

and, less frequently, one pulled into the mall and disgorged a porky Florida Cracker family desirous of some Burger King or a couple of bare-midriffed Britney Spears clones in search of emergency eyeliner.

This dose of reality caused the mud to settle, the sediment to wash from my thoughts, but clarity did not improve my prospects. I tossed my trash into a bin. Zombie hold 'em players and doe-eyed ladies who were a little damaged . . . I wanted that crap out of my head, I wanted things back the way they had been. Small Time. That was me. Yet I was content with my small-time life. I was adept at it, I was pleased with my general lack of ambition. Tentatively, I gave the trash bin a kick. It quivered in fear, and that inspired me to unload on it. The bin rolled out into the parking lot and I kept on kicking it. I crushed its plastic ribs, I flattened it and squeezed out its soggy paper-and-crumpled-plastic guts. Inside the Baskin-Robbins, people stared but didn't appear terribly alarmed. They were accustomed to such displays. Heat drove men insane in these parts. The manager took a stand by the door, ready to defend his tubs of flavored goo, but the moment passed when I might have stormed his glassed-in fortress and engendered the headline "Five Dead in Baskin-Robbins Spree Killing—Louisiana Native Charged in Crime." I strode out to the highway, fueled by a thin, poisonous anger, and was nearly struck by a speeding Corvette that veered onto the shoulder. Dizzy with adrenaline, I gazed off along the road. Despite the vegetation, I felt I was on the edge of a desert. Weeds stirred in a fitful breeze. One day the Great Sky Monkey, satiated with banana daiquiri ice cream, would drop down from the Heavenly Banyan Tree to use the place for toilet paper. I tried to calm myself, but everywhere I cast my eye I saw omens and portents and outright promises of doom. I saw a wine bottle shattered into a spray of diamonds on the asphalt, I saw a gray-haired man poking his cane feebly at a dead palm frond, I saw a sweaty twelve-year-old girl with a mean, sexy face pedaling her bicycle full tilt toward me, and I saw a black car with smoked windows idling beside a dumpster under the killing white glare of the sun.

Frank Ruddle looked like an empty leather gym bag. He had recently lost a great deal of weight, something he proclaimed loudly and often, and his skin had not tightened sufficiently to compensate. Forty-something; with thinning blond hair and a store-bought orange tan and a salesman's jaunty manner; these attributes—if attributes they were—had been counterbalanced by dewlaps, jowls, and an overall lack of muscle tone. His outfits always included some cranberry article of clothing. A tie, a pair of slacks, a shirt. I assumed this was his lucky color, for it was not a flattering one, serving to accent his unhealthiness. At the tables, prior to making a bold play, he was in the habit of kissing a large diamond signet ring. He appeared to have taken a shine to Pellerin, perhaps in part because Pellerin was an even unhealthier specimen than he, and, when sitting at the same table, he would applaud Pellerin's victories, including those won at his expense, with enthusiasm.

"Damn!" he would say, and give an admiring shake of the head. "I didn't see that coming."

Pellerin, in heads-up play, let Ruddle win the lion's share of the pots

and took his losses with poor grace. Watching him hustle Ruddle was like watching a wolf toy with a house pet, and I might have felt sorry for the man if I had been in a position to be sympathetic.

We had been at Seminole Paradise ten days before Ruddle baited his hook. As Pellerin and I were entering the casino in the early afternoon, he intercepted us and invited us for lunch at the hotel's fake Irish pub, McSorely's, a place with sawdust on the floor, something of an anomaly, as I understood it, among fake Irish pubs. Pellerin was in a foul mood, but when he saw the waiter approaching, a freckly, red-headed college-age kid costumed as a leprechaun, he busted out laughing and thereafter made sport of him throughout the meal. The delight he took from baiting the kid perplexed Ruddle, but he didn't let it stand in the way of his agenda. He buttered Pellerin up and down both sides, telling him what a marvelous player he was, revisiting a hand he had won the night before, remarking on its brilliant disposition. Then he said, "You know, I'm having some people over this weekend for a game. I'd be proud if you could join us."

Pellerin knocked back the dregs of his third margarita. "We're going to head on to Miami, I think. See what I can shake loose from the casinos down there."

Ruddle looked annoyed by this rebuff, but he pressed on. "I sure wish you'd change your mind. There'll be a ton of dead money in the game."

"Yeah?" Pellerin winked at me. "Some of it yours, no doubt."

Ruddle laughed politely. "I'll try not to disappoint you," he said.

"How much money we talking here?"

"There's a five hundred thousand dollar buy-in."

Pellerin sucked on a tooth. "You trying to hustle me, Frank? I mean, you seen me play. You know I'm good, but you must think you're better."

"I'm confident I can play with you," Ruddle said.

Pellerin guffawed.

"I beg your pardon?" said Ruddle.

"I once knew a rooster thought it could run for president 'til it met up with a hatchet."

Ruddle's smile quivered at the corners.

"Shit, Frank! I'm just joshing you." Pellerin lifted his empty glass to summon the leprechaun. "This is a cash game, right?"

"Of course."

"What sort of security you got? I'm not about to bring a wad of cash to a game that doesn't have adequate security."

"I can assure you my security's more than adequate," said Ruddle tensely.

"Yeah, well. Going by how security's run at the Seminole, your idea of adequate might be a piggybank with a busted lock. I'll send Jack over to check things out. If he says it's cool, we'll gamble."

I sent Ruddle a silent message that said, See what I have to put up with, but he didn't respond and dug into his steak viciously, as if it were the liver of his ancient enemy.

Somehow we made it through lunch. I pushed the small talk. Movies, the weather. Ruddle offered curt responses and Pellerin sucked down margaritas, stared out the window, and doodled on a napkin. After Ruddle had paid the check, I steered Pellerin outside and, to punish him, dragged him on a brisk walk about the pool. He complained that his legs were hurting and I said, "We need to get you in shape. That game could go all night."

I walked him until he had sweated out his liquid lunch, then allowed him to collapse at a poolside table not far from the lifeguard's chair. They must have treated the water earlier that day, because the chlorine reek was strong. In the pool, a huge sun-dazzled aquamarine with a waterfall slide at its nether end, packs of kids cavorted under their parents' less-than-watchful eyes, bikini girls and Speedo boys preened for one another. Close at hand, an elderly woman in a one-piece glumly paddled along the edge, her upper body supported by a flotation device in the form of a polka-dotted snail. The atmosphere was of amiable chatter, shrieks, and splashing. A honey-blond waitress in shorts and an overstrained tank top ambled over from the service bar, but I brushed her off.

"You got a plan?" Pellerin asked out of the blue.

"A plan? Sure," I said. "First Poland, then the world."

"If you don't, we need to start thinking about one."

I cocked an eye toward him, then looked away.

"That's why I played Ruddle like I did," Pellerin said. "So you could get a line on his security."

"We do what Billy tells us," I said. "That's our safest bet."

Three boys ran past, one trying to snap the others with a towel; the lifeguard whistled them down.

"I did have a thought," I said. "I thought we could tell Ruddle what Billy's up to and hope he can protect us. But that's a short-term solution at best. Billy's still going to be a problem."

"I like it. It buys us time."

"If Ruddle goes for it. He might not. I'm not sure how well he knows Billy. He might be tight with him, and he might decide to give him a call."

A plump, pale, middle-aged man wearing a fishing hat and bathing trunks, holding a parasol drink, negotiated the stairs at the shallow end of the pool, stood and sipped in thigh-deep water.

"I'll check out Ruddle's security. It may give me an idea." I put my hands flat on the table and prepared to stand. "We should look in on Jo before you start playing."

Pellerin's lips thinned. "To hell with her."

"You two got a problem?"

"She lied to me."

"Everyone fibs now and again."

"She lied about something pretty crucial."

I suspected that Jo had told him he hadn't always been Josey Pellerin. "Mind if I ask what?"

"Yeah," he said. "I mind."

I watched him out of the corner of my eye. His features relaxed from their belligerent expression and he appeared to be tracking the progress of something through the air. I asked what he was looking at, half-expecting him to claim that he had discovered a microscopic planet with an erratic orbit, but he said, "A gnat." Then he laughed. "A gnat with a fucking aura."

"You see that shit all the time?"

"Auras? Yeah. Weirder stuff than that."

"Like what?"

"Shadows." He fumbled in his pocket and fished out a wad of bills, napkins, gum wrappers—there must have been thirty or forty hundreds mixed in with the debris; he selected a twenty, tossed the rest on the table

and hailed the blond waitress. "Margarita rocks," he told her. "Salt."

"Better slow down," I said. "If you're going to play poker, that is."

"You kidding me? I need a handicap to play with those old ladies."

I let my thoughts wander, vaguely mindful of the activity in the pool, speculating on the rate of skin cancers among the patrons of the Seminole Paradise, reflecting on the fact that I had not seen a single Seminole during our stay, if one omitted the grotesque statue of Osceola in the lobby, fashioned from a shiny yellowish brown material—petrified Cheese Whiz was my best guess. The waitress set Pellerin's margarita down on the table; her eyes snagged on the cash strewn across it. She offered Pellerin his change and he told her to keep it. He tilted his head, squinted at her name tag, and said, "Is waitressing your regular job, Tammy, or just something you do on the side?"

Tammy didn't know how to take this. She flashed her teeth, struck a pose that accentuated her breasts and said, "I'm sorry?"

"Reason I ask," said Pellerin, "I wonder if you ever done any hostessing? I'm throwing a party up in my suite tonight. Around ten o'clock. And I was hoping to get a couple of girls to help me host it. You know the drill. Take care of the guests. See that everyone's got a drink. You'd be doing me a huge favor." He reached into his other pocket, peeled what looked to be about a grand off his roll and held it out to her. "That's a down payment."

A light switched on in Tammy's brain and she re-evaluated Pellerin. "So how many guests are we talking about?" she asked.

"I'm the only one you'd have to worry about." Pellerin gave a lizardly smile. "But I can be a real chore."

"Why, I think we can probably handle it." Tammy accepted the bills, folded them, stashed them next to her heart. "Around ten, you say?"

"I'm in the Everglades Suite," said Pellerin. "Wear something negligible. And one more thing, darling. It'd be nice if your friend was a Latina. Maybe a Cuban girl. On the slender side. Maybe her name could be . . . Tomasina?"

"Why, isn't that a coincidence! That's my best friend's name!" Tammy turned and twitched her cute butt. "See ya tonight."

As she sashayed off, Pellerin slurped down half his margarita and sighed. "Ain't freedom grand?"

"What was that bullshit?" I said. "You're in the Everglades Suite?"

"Three nights from now, we could be lying in a landfill," he said. "I booked myself a suite and I'm going to have me a party."

"This isn't wise," I said. "Suppose she gets a look at your eyes?"

"Did you get a load of the brain on that girl? I could tell her I was down in the Amazon and got stung by electric bees, she'd be fine with it."

I wasn't too sure about that, but then I was distracted from worry by thinking about Jo all alone in Room 1138.

"Yeah, boy!" said Pellerin, and grinned—he'd been watching me. "What they say is true. Every cloud has a silver lining."

I made no response.

"Hell, if Jocundra don't do it for you," he said, "I'm sure Tammy and Tomasina wouldn't mind accommodating another guest."

"That's all right."

"On second thought, I believe you're the kind of guy who needs that old emotion lotion to really get off."

"Shut your hole, okay?"

Pellerin finished his margarita, signaled Tammy for another. I was through cautioning him about his drinking. Maybe he'd drop dead. That would let us off the hook. More people had jumped into the pool—it looked like a sparkling blue bowl of human head soup. There came a loud screech that resolved into "The Piña Colada Song" piped in over speakers attached to the surrounding palms. I was half-angry, though I couldn't have told you at what, and that damn song exacerbated my mood. Tammy brought the margarita and engaged in playful banter with Pellerin.

"Does your friend want a friend?" she asked. "Because I bet I could fix him up."

"Naw, he's got a friend," said Pellerin. "The trouble is, she ain't treating him all that friendly."

"Aw! Well, if he needs a friendlier friend, you let me know, hear?"

I shut my eyes and squeezed the arms of my chair, exerting myself in an attempt to suppress a shout. Eventually I relaxed and my mind snapped back into on-duty mode. "What kind of shadows?" I asked Pellerin.

He gazed at me blankly. "Huh?"

"You said you were seeing shadows. What kind?"

"You're starting to sound like Jocundra, man."

"What, is it a big secret?"

He licked salt off the rim of his glass. "I don't guess they're shadows, really. They're these black shapes, like a man, but they don't have any faces. Sometimes they have lights inside them. Shifting lights. They kind of flow together."

I laughed. "Sounds like a lava lamp!"

"Everybody's got one," he said. "But it's not an aura. It's more substantial. I see patterns, too. Like . . ." He poked around in the pile of money and trash on the table and plucked out a napkin bearing the McSorely's logo. "Like this here. The whole thing creeps me out."

On the napkin were several sketches of what appeared to be ironwork designs: *veves*. I asked why it creeped him out.

"When we were on the island," Pellerin went on, "I found these books on voodoo. And while I was leafing through them, I saw that same design. It's used in the practice of voodoo. Called a *veve*. That there's the *veve* of Ogun Badagris, the voodoo god of war. And this . . ." He pointed to a second sketch. "This one's Ogun in his aspect as the god of fire. I get that one a lot." He paused and then said, "You know anything about it?"

I had no doubt that he could read me if I lied and, although it was my instinct to lie, I didn't see any reason to hide things from him anymore; yet I didn't want to freak him out, either.

"Jo told me she had another patient who saw this same sort of pattern," I said.

"What else she tell you?"

"She said he did some great things before . . ."

"Before he died, right?"

"Yeah."

There ensued a silence, during which I noticed that the song playing over the speakers was now "Margaritaville."

"She told me he got to where he could cure the sick," I said.

He stared at me. "Fuck."

"Let's get through the weekend, then you can worry about it," I said.

"Easy for you to say."

"It's a lot to process, I give you that. But you can't . . ."

"I knew she was holding back, but . . . man!" He picked up his drink, put it back down. "You know, I don't much care if we get through the weekend."

"I care," I said, but he appeared not to hear me, gazing out across the pool toward the hedge of palms and shrubbery that hid the concrete block wall that separated Seminole Paradise from a Circuit City store.

"You ever have the feeling you're on the verge of understanding everything?" he said. "That if you could see things a tad clearer, you'd have the big picture in view? I mean the *Big Picture*. How it all fits together. That's where I'm at. But I also get this feeling I don't fucking want to see the big picture, that it's about ten shades darker than the picture I already got." He chewed on that a second, then heaved up to his feet. "I'm going to the casino."

"Wait a second!" I said as he walked away.

I busied myself plucking the hundreds out of the mess we'd made on the table, and I pressed the clutter of bills into his hands. He seemed startled by the money, as if it were an unexpected bonus, but then he stepped to the edge of the glittering pool and said in a loud voice, "Hey! Here go, you lucky people!" and tossed the money into the air.

There couldn't have been more than four or five thousand dollars, but for the furor it caused, it might have been a million. As the bills fluttered down, people surged through the water after them; others sprawled on the tiles in their mad scramble to dive into the pool. Children were elbowed aside, the elderly were at risk. A buff young lad surfaced with a joyous expression, clutching a fistful of bills, and was immediately hauled under by a bikini girl and her boyfriend, their faces aglow with greed. The water was lashed into a froth as by sharks in a feeding frenzy. Terrified screams replaced the prettier shrieks that had attended roughhousing and dunkings. One man dragged a woman from the melee and sought to give her mouth-to-mouth, whereupon she kicked him in the groin. The lifeguard's umbrella toppled into the water. He shouted incoherent orders over his mike. This served to increase the chaos. He began blowing his whistle over and over, an irate clown with his cheeks puffed and a nose covered in sunblock.

Pellerin was laughing as I pulled him away from the pool, and he was still laughing when I shoved him through the double glass doors of the hotel. I adopted a threatening pose, intending to lecture him, and he made an effort to stifle his laughter; but then I started laughing, too, and his mirth redoubled. We stood wheezing and giggling in the lobby, giddy as teenage girls, drawing hostile stares from the guests waiting on line at Reception, enduring the drudgery of check-in. At the time I assumed that we were laughing at two different things, or at different aspects of the same thing, but now I'm not so sure.

That picture of Pellerin laughing by the side of the pool, bills fluttering out above the water. . . . It emerges from the smoke of memory like a

painted dream, like one of those images that come just before a commercial break in a television drama, when the action freezes and the colors are altered by a laboratory process. Though it seems unreal, the rest—by comparison—seems in retrospect less than unreal, a dusting of atoms, whispers, and suggestions of hue that we must arrange into a story in order to lend body to this central moment. Yet the stories we create are invariably inaccurate and the central moments we choose to remember change us as much or more as we change them. And so, in truth, my memories are no more "real" than Josey Pellerin's, although they have, as Jo would put it, more foundation. . . . But I was saying, that picture of Pellerin beside the pool stayed with me because, I believe, it was the first time I had acknowledged him as a man and not a freak. And when I went to see him late the next morning, it was motivated more by curiosity over how he'd made out with Tammy and Tomasina than by caretaker concerns.

The door to the suite had been left ajar. I sneaked a look inside and, seeing no one around, eased into the foyer. The living room was empty, an air-conditioned vacancy of earth tones and overstuffed furniture, with potted palms and a photomural of the Everglades attempting a naturalistic touch. Everything was very neat. Magazines centered on the coffee table; no empty glasses or bottles. On the sideboard, a welcome basket of fruit, wine, and cheese was still clenched in shrink-wrap. I proceeded down the hall and came to an open door. Wearing a terrycloth bathrobe and sunglasses, Pellerin sat beside the rumpled bed, his feet propped on a table covered with a linen cloth and laden with dishes and metal dish covers, drinking champagne out of a bottle and eating a slice of pizza, looking out the window at the overcast. In the bed, partly covered by the sheets, a brown-skinned girl lay on her belly, black hair fanned across her face. Tomasina. There was nary a sign of Tammy, though the bed was king-sized and she might well have been buried beneath the covers. I knocked and he beckoned me to come on in. A big scorch mark on the wall behind his head, about the size of a serving tray, caught my notice. I asked what had happened and he told me that Tammy had shot an aerosol spray through a lit cigarette lighter, producing a flamethrower effect.

"You know those sons-of-bitches wouldn't let me order in a pizza last night," he said. "Is that bullshit or what? I had to bribe the bellboy." He pointed to a Domino's box on the floor—it held two slices fettered with strings of congealed cheese—and told me to help myself.

I declined, sat opposite him, and he asked what time it was.

"Around eleven." I picked up a plastic pill bottle from the table. The label read:

R. Saloman
Viagra 50 mg.

1 tablet as needed.

"Who's R. Saloman?" I asked.

"Beats me. Friend of the bellboy, maybe. The kid's a walking pharmacy." Pellerin scratched his chest. "Want some room service?"

"I'm okay."

"How about some coffee? Sure, you want some coffee."

He reached for the phone, ordered coffee and sweet rolls. Tomasina stirred but did not wake.

"Where's Tammy?" I asked.

"In the head? Or she might have gone home. We were doing shots last night and she got sick."

"You trying to kill yourself, man? Maybe you haven't noticed, but you're not in the best of shape."

Pellerin had a swig of champagne. "You my fairy godmother now?"

"I'm just being solicitous of your health."

"Because that was Jocundra's job, and I shit-canned her."

"Look, don't get the idea you're in charge here. You're not in charge."

"Oh, I'm far from having that idea. We all know who's in charge."

Jocundra's voice called from the living room. "Josey!"

"In here, darling!" He gave me a wink. "This ought to be good."

Seconds later, Jocundra materialized in the doorway, dressed in jeans and a man's pinstriped dress shirt with the sleeves neatly rolled up. Her eyes stuck on Tomasina, then went to me and Pellerin. "I need to talk to you. I'll come back."

"Don't be that way," said Pellerin. "We're all pals. Sit with us. We got coffee coming."

She had another glance at Tomasina, then came to the table and took the chair between me and Pellerin.

"I spoke to management," she said. "They're not going to kick us out, but you're banned from the pool area."

"Damn!" said Pellerin. "And here I was dying for a swim."

Jocundra started to speak, likely to reprimand him, but thought better of it. An edgy quiet closed in around us.

"You know they got a couple of live gators in that pond in the courtyard? That's why there's a fence around it." Pellerin shook his head in mock amazement. "They don't never show themselves. Can't say as I blame them."

Another stretch of quiet.

"I'm going over to Ruddle's house later to see what I can see," I said. "It's right on the water. That might be good for us. It's a potential avenue of escape if things go south."

There would probably have been another interval of silence, if not for Tammy who, wearing a towel turbaned around her hair and nothing else, entered the room, said, "Oops!" and tippy-toed to the bed, slipping in under the covers next to Tomasina. She sat up, shook out her hair, and said to me, "Is this your friend? She's so pretty!"

"Hey, babel!" Pellerin said. "I thought you went home."

"I was making myself sweet for you," said Tammy in a little-girl voice.

"I'll be in my room," said Jocundra.

"Why you acting this way?" Pellerin caught her wrist. "Like you been wronged or something. If anyone's been wronged, it's me. Sit down and be polite. There's no reason we can't act like friends."

Tammy, baffled, gestured at me and said to Pellerin, "I thought she was his friend."

Jocundra twisted free and walked out. I caught up to her in the living room. "Hey, slow down," I said, blocking the door to the suite.

She folded her arms and lowered her head, shielding her eyes with one hand, as if close to tears. "Let me by!"

"All right." I moved aside, inviting her to leave. "You're not helping him by behaving like this. You're not helping me, you're not helping yourself. But go ahead. Take a break. I'll handle things. Just try and pull yourself together by Saturday night."

She stood a moment, then walked over to a sofa, stood another moment and sat down.

"Why're you getting so bent out of shape?" I dropped into a chair. "I thought you didn't have a strong connection with this guy."

"I don't!"

"Then why . . ."

"Because I *couldn't* make a connection with him. It's my fault he's alone."

"He's not exactly alone," I reminded her.

"You know it's not the same. He needs someone with him who understands what he's going through."

With two people breathing in it, the room seemed almost airless, like a room in a Motel 6 with bolted-shut plastic windows. I thought about yanking back the drapes and opening the glass door onto the balcony, but I couldn't muster the energy.

"He's not exercising," Jocundra said. "He's not taking his meds."

"Maybe you should have slept with him."

"I tried once, but . . . I couldn't. And that's your fault."

I was about to ask her why it was my fault—I knew why, but I wanted to hear her say it—when Pellerin limped into the room.

"I've been taking my meds. And I'm not a fool." He lowered himself into a chair, smirking at us. "You crazy kids! Why don't you run away and get hitched?"

Jo's startled expression waned; she folded her hands in her lap and bowed her head, like Anne Boleyn awaiting the inevitable.

"It's no big thing," said Pellerin. "Really. So how about we ditch the soap opera and move on?"

"I'm worried about you," Jo said.

"Fine. Worry about me," said Pellerin. "But don't get all fucked up behind it."

The doorbell bonged and a man's voice called out, "Room service."

"I'll get it," I said.

I prevented the room service guy from entering, but he peered over my shoulder as I signed for the coffee and rolls. After I had poured coffee for me and Jo, Pellerin asked if I'd see whether the girls wanted anything, so I walked back to the bedroom to check and found Tammy and Tomasina engaged in activity that would have made the White Goddess blush. I returned to the living room and, in response to Pellerin's inquiring look, said, "They're good."

"We were thinking," Jo said, "that we should have a Plan B."

I joined her on the sofa, tore open a package of Sweet'n Low and dumped the contents into my coffee. "I didn't realize we had a Plan A."

"Confessing to Ruddie," said Pellerin.

"That's our plan? Okay." I stirred the coffee. "Maybe we could create a disturbance. Get away in the confusion. I don't know."

Pellerin said, "You're not exactly an expert criminal, are you?"

"I'm not a criminal at all. I arrange things, I put people together. It's a gray area."

"He's an entrepreneur." Jo smiled at me as if to cut the sting of what she'd said.

A shift in alignment seemed to have occurred—judging by that remark, she had repositioned herself closer to Pellerin than to me. I wondered if she were aware of this. A cruel comment came to mind, but I chose not to make it.

"We could cause a major earthquake, and I doubt it would help," I said. "Josey can walk pretty good, but I expect running's going to be called for and he's not up to that."

Even the coffee sucked at Seminole Paradise—I set my cup down. Pellerin fiddled with the sash of his robe and Jo clinked a spoon against her cup, tapping out a nervous rhythm.

"What about the stuff I saw you doing on the island?" I asked Pellerin. "The night we had that dust-up on the beach, you were doing things with the water. Pushing waves around."

A hunted expression flashed across his face, and I had the thought that he might be hiding something. "I can do a few parlor tricks," he said.

"What's your best one?" I asked. "Give us a demonstration."

"All right." He leaned over the table and put a napkin in an ashtray. "Sometimes I can do it, but other times . . . not so much."

He concentrated on the napkin, wiggled his fingers like a guitar player lightly fingering the strings. After about twenty, thirty seconds, smoke began to trickle up from the napkin, followed by a tiny flame. He snuffed it out with a spoon. Jo made a speech-like noise, but didn't follow up.

"That's my biggie," he said, leaning back. "If we had another month, I might be able to do something more impressive. But . . ." He shrugged, then said to Jo, "If we come through this, I want you to tell me about Ogun Badagris. How that relates to me."

She nodded.

"You know, that might have possibilities," I said. "If you could start an electrical fire, we . . ."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," he said. "After you get back from Ruddle's, we'll talk then."

"I'll tell you now if you want," Jo said. "About Ogun. It won't take too long."

Pellerin suddenly appeared tired, pale and hollow-cheeked, slumping in his chair, but he said, "Yeah, why don't you?"

I was tired, too. Tired of talking, tired of the Seminole Paradise, tired of whatever game Jo was playing, tired of listening to my own thoughts. I told them I was off to Ruddle's place and would return later that afternoon. On my way out, I heard a hissing from down the hallway. Tammy, wearing bra and panties, waved to me and retreated toward the bedroom, stopping near the door.

"Is your friend going to stay?" she asked in a stage whisper.

"For a while."

She frowned. "Well, I don't know."

"You don't know what?"

"We didn't bargain on a four-way, especially with another woman."

"You got something against women? It didn't look like you did."

Tammy didn't catch my drift and I told her what I had witnessed.

"That's different," she said primly.

"Would more money help?"

She perked up. "Money always helps."

"I'm going out now, but I'll take care of you. I promise."

"Okay!" She stood on tip-toe and kissed my cheek.

"One more thing," I said. "Jo's kind of shy, but once you start her up, she's a tigress."

"I bet." Tammy shivered with delight. "Those long legs!"

"So in a few minutes why don't you . . . maybe the both of you. Why don't you go out there and warm her up? She really loves intimate touching. You know what I mean? She likes to be fondled. She may object at first, but stay with it and she'll melt. I'll get you your money. Deal?"

"Deal! Don't worry. We'll get her going."

"I'm sure you will," I said.

The one salient thing I learned at Ruddle's was that a pier extended out about a hundred feet into the water from a strip of beach, and at the end of the pier was moored a sleek white Chris Craft that had been set up for sports fishing—the keys to the boat, the *Mystery Girl*, were kept in a small room off the kitchen that also contained the controls to the security system. The house itself was a postcard. Big and white and ultramodern, it looked like the Chris Craft's birth mother. An Olympic-sized pool fronted the beach, tennis courts were off to the side. The grounds were a small nation of landscaped palms and airbrushed lawn, its borders defined by a decorous electric fence topped with razor wire and guarded by a pink gatehouse with a uniform on duty. There was a plaque on the gate announcing that the whole shebang was called The Sea Ranch, but it would have been more apt if it had been named The Sea What I Got.

Ruddle's son showed me around—a blond super-preppie with a cracker accent that had acquired a New Englander gloss. During our brief time together he said both "y'all" and "wicked haahd," as if he hadn't decided which act suited him best. He was impatient to get back to his tanned, perfect girlfriend, an aspiring young coke whore clearly high on more than life. She sat by the pool, listening to reggae, painting faces on her toenails, and flashed me an addled smile that gave me a contact high. I made sure to ask the kid a slew of inane questions ("Is that door sealed with a double grommet?" "What kind of infrared package does that sensor use?"), delaying and stalling in order to annoy him until, growing desperate, he gave me the run of the house and scurried back to her side.

The card room could be isolated from the remainder of the house. It had no windows and soundproofed walls, a bar, and, against the rear wall, three trophy cases celebrating Ruddle's skill at poker. The place of honor was held by a ring won at a World Series of Poker circuit tournament in Tunica, Mississippi. It was flanked by several photographs of Ruddle with poker notables, Phil Ivey and Chris "Jesus" Ferguson and the like, who were ap-

parently among those he had defeated. I was inspecting the table, an elegance of teak and emerald felt lit by an hanging lamp, when a lean, long-haired, thirtyish man in cut-offs walked in holding an apple, and asked in a Eurotrash accent what I was doing. I told him I was casing the joint.

"No, no!" He wagged a finger at me. "This is not good . . . the drugs."

I explained that "casing the joint" meant I was looking the house over, seeing whether it would be possible to burglarize it.

He took a bite of his apple and, after chewing, said, "I am Torsten. And you are?"

I thought he had misunderstood me again, but when I had introduced myself, he said, "You have chosen a bad time. There will be many here this weekend. Many guards, many guests."

"How many guards?" I asked.

"Perhaps five . . . six." He fingered the edge of the table. "This is excellent work."

"Are you a friend of the family?"

"Yes, of course. Torsten is everyone's friend."

He strolled around the table, trailing a hand across the felt, and said, "Now I must go. I wish you will have success with your crime."

Later that afternoon as I was preparing to leave, sitting in my rental car and making some notes, I spotted him outside the house. He was carrying a Weed Whacker, yelling at an older man who was pruning bushes, speaking without a trace of an accent, cussing in purest American. There might be, I thought, a lesson to be drawn from this incident, but I decided that puzzling it out wasn't worth the effort. While driving back to the hotel, I noticed that a motorcyclist in a helmet with a tinted faceplate was traveling at a sedate rate of speed and keeping behind me. Whenever I slowed, he dropped back or switched lanes, and when I parked in the hotel lot, he placed a call on his cell phone. Aggravated and wanting to convey that feeling, I walked toward him, but he kicked over the engine and sped off before I could get near.

A Do Not Disturb card was affixed to the doorknob of the Everglades Suite, so I went down to 1138. Jo, who had been napping, let me in and went into the bathroom to wash her face. I sat at her table and put my feet up. She came back out and lay down on the bed, turned to face me. After I'd briefed her on what I had learned, she said softly, "I'm glad you're back."

"I'm glad you're glad," I said glibly, wondering at the intimacy implied by her tone.

She shut her eyes and I thought for a moment she had drifted off. "I'm afraid," she said.

"Yeah. Me, too."

"You don't act afraid."

"If I let myself think about Saturday, I get to shaking in my boots." I leaned toward her, resting my elbows on my knees. "We got to tough it out."

"I'm not feeling very tough."

I said something neutral and she reached out her hand, inviting me to take it. She caressed my wrist with her fingertip. Holding her hand while sitting on the edge of the chair grew awkward, and I moved to the bed. She curled up against me. I stroked her hair, murmured an assurance,

but that seemed insufficient, so I kicked off my shoes and lay down, wrapping my arms around her from behind.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?"

"For how I behaved on the island. For this morning. You must think I'm a terrible tease. But when I see Josey like that, I feel I should comfort him, even though . . ."

"What?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"Say."

Her eyes teared; she pressed my hand against her breast. "It's not him I want to comfort. You know that."

I told her not to cry.

She drew a deep breath, steadying herself. "That's how I was brought up," she said. "I was taught to deny what I wanted, that I had to let it come second to what everyone else wanted."

"It's okay."

"No! it's not! I watched my mother wither away taking care of my daddy, his brothers, of every stray that wandered by. She could scarcely let a second pass without doing for him. I swore I wouldn't be like her. But I'm exactly like her."

I came to realize that we were less having a conversation than engaging in a litany: she, the priestess, delivering the oration, and I, the acolyte, offering appropriate responses. And as we continued this ritual of confession and assurance, the words served to focus me on the hollow of her throat, the pale skin below her collarbone, the lace trim of a brassiere peeking out between the buttons of her shirt, until the only things in the world were the sound of her voice and the particulars of her body. For all it mattered, she could have been reciting a butcher's list or reading from a manual on automotive maintenance.

"Feeling that way screwed up almost every relationship I ever had," she said. "Because I *didn't* feel that way. Not at heart . . . not really. It was just a rule I couldn't break. I resented men for making me obey the rule, but they didn't enforce it. I did. I couldn't simply be with them, I couldn't enjoy them. And now I don't care about rules, I finally don't care, and it's too late."

I told her it wasn't too late, we'd pull through somehow.

Dominus vobiscum,

Et cum spiritus tuo.

Tears slipped along the almost imperceptible lines beside her eyes. I propped myself up on an elbow, intending to invoke some further optimistic cliché, wanting to make certain that she had taken it to heart. Lying half-beneath me, searching my face, her expression grew strangely grave, and then her tongue flicked out to taste my mouth, her hips arched against mine. The solicitude, the tenderness I felt . . . all that was peeled away to reveal a more urgent affinity, and I tore at her clothing, fumbling with buttons, buckle, snaps, rough with her in my hurry. She cried out in abandon, as if suffering the pain of her broken principles. Cities of thought crumbled, my awareness of our circumstance dissolved, and a last snatch of bleak self-commentary captioned my desire—I saw in my mind's eye the

image of a red burning thing in a fiery sky, not a true sun but a great shear of light in which was embedded an indistinct shape, like that of a bird flying sideways or a woman's genital smile, and beneath it a low, smoldering wreckage that stretched from horizon to horizon, in which the shadows of men crouched and scuttered and fled with hands clamped to their ears so as to muffle the echoes of an apocalyptic pronouncement.

We spent that night and most of the next day in 1138. Every so often I would run up and check on Pellerin, but my concern was perfunctory. We stayed in bed through the afternoon and, late in the day, as Jo drowsed beside me, I analyzed what had happened and how we had ended up like this, who had said what and who had done what. Our mutual approach seemed to have been thoroughly crude and awkward, but I thought that, if examined closely, all the axiomatic beams that supported us, the scheme and structure of every being, could be perceived as equally crude and awkward . . . yet those scraps of physical and emotional poetry of which we were capable could transform the rest into an architecture of Doric elegance and simplicity. The romantic character of the idea cut against my grain, but I couldn't deny it. One touch of her skin could make sense out of stupidity and put the world in right order.

About seven o'clock, simply because we felt we should do something else with the day, we walked down to the strip mall, to the Baskin-Robbins, and sat by the window in the frosty air conditioning. I had two scoops of vanilla; she had a butterscotch sundae. We ate while the high school girls back of the counter listened to the same Fiona Apple song again and again, arguing over the content of the lyrics as if they espoused an abstruse dialectic. Jo and I talked, or rather I talked and she questioned me about my childhood. I told her my father had been a saxophone player in New Orleans and that my mother had run off when I was seven, leaving me in his care. Jo remarked that this must have been hard on me, and I said, "He wasn't much of a dad. I spent a lot of time running the streets. He was primarily concerned with dope and women, but when he was in the mood, he could be fun. He taught me to play sax and guitar, and made up songs for me and got me to learn them. I could have done worse."

"Do you remember the songs?"

"Bits and pieces."

"Let's hear one!"

After considerable persuasion, I tapped out a rhythm on the tabletop and sang in a whispery voice:

"I said, Hey, hey! Devil get away!
Get a move on, boy . . .
I'll lay the saint's ray on ya.
Shake a calabash skull,
Make the sign of the jay . . .
Don't you give me no trouble,
or as sure as you're born,
I'll make you jump now, Satan,
'cause I got your shinbone."

"They most of them were like that one," I said. "The old man was a bear

for religion. He'd haul me down to the temple once or twice a week and have me anointed with some remedy or another."

"I can picture you singing that when you were a little boy," she said. "You must have been cute."

In the darkened parking lot, I saw the black car I had noticed a few days earlier, the occupants invisible behind smoked glass. The sight banished my nostalgia. I asked Jo what she had told Pellerin the previous day when she talked to him about Ogun Badagris.

"I told him about Donnell," she said.

"About the big copper *veve* and all?"

"Yes." She licked the bottom of her spoon.

"How about your theory? About the Ezawa process being an analog of possession. You tell him about that?"

"I couldn't lie to him anymore."

What'd he say?"

"He was depressed. I told him if we got out of this situation, he'd live a long time. Long enough to understand everything that was happening to him. That depressed him even more. He said that didn't motivate him to want to live that long. I tried to cheer him up, but . . ." She pinned me with a stern look. "Did you sic those girls on me?"

"What girls?" I asked innocently.

"You know which ones."

"I was pissed at you. I'm over it now, but I was seriously pissed."

"Then you would have been delighted by my reaction." She dabbed at her lips with a napkin. "Once they came in, that was it for the conversation."

"So y'all had some fun, did you?"

"Maybe," she said, drawing out the first syllable of the word, giving it a playful reading. "I thought the dark-haired girl was very attractive. You never know, do you, when love will strike?"

"Is that right?"

"Mm-hmm. Think I should have gotten her number?"

"We could invite her on the honeymoon, if you want."

"Is that what we're having? A honeymoon?"

"It might have to do for one," I said.

Not long afterward, we left the Baskin-Robbins and, as we crossed the lot, I noticed a motorcyclist, the same one, judging by his bike, who had tailed me the day before. He was parked about ten slots down from the black car. I thought Billy must be getting paranoid, now that he was close to his goal, and had doubled up on security. We walked along the shoulder through the warm black night. Moths whirled under the arc lamps like scraps of pale ash. Jo's shampoo overbore the bitter scents of the roadside weeds. She slipped a hand into mine and by that simple gesture charged me with confidence. Despite the broken paths we had traveled to reach this night, this sorry patch of earth, I believed we had arrived at our appointed place.

There was some talk that we should approach Ruddie prior to the game, but I convinced Pellerin and Jo that the wisest course was to wait until we had a better idea of the connection between Ruddie and Billy Pitch. We held a strategy session before the limo picked us up, but since our strategy was basically to throw ourselves on Ruddie's mercy, the

meeting was more or less a pep rally. Pellerin, however, was beyond pep-ping up. As Jo and I led the cheers, he glumly flipped through channels on the TV and, instead of his usual pre-game ritual of slamming drinks, sipped bottled water.

During the drive, Pellerin sat with a suitcase full of cash between his legs, flipping the handle back and forth, creating a repetitive clicking noise that I found irritating. I rested my eyes on Jo. She had on the black cocktail dress that she'd worn the first time I saw her. Whenever she caught me looking, her smile flickered on, but would quickly dissolve and she would return to gazing out the window. I managed to sustain my confidence by rehearsing what I intended to say to Ruddie. But as we pulled past the gatehouse and the lights of that enormous house floated up against the dark, like a spaceship waiting to take on abductees, I felt a tightness in my throat and, the second we stepped through the door, I realized that Plan A was out the window and, probably, Plan B as well. Standing with a group of middle-aged-to-elderly men at the entrance to the living room, wearing what looked to be powder blue lounging pajamas, was Billy Pitch. Clayton was not in evidence, but close by Billy's shoulder stood a lanky individual with a prominent Adam's apple and close-cropped gray hair and a cold, angular hillbilly face. I recognized him from New Orleans—Alan Goess, a contract killer. Clayton, I assumed, was too showy an item for Billy to take on a trip. Seven or eight young men in private security uniforms waited off to one side, watching their elders with neutral expressions, but contempt was evident in their body language.

Ruddie steered Pellerin away and introduced him to the other players, who were dressed in clothes that appeared to have been bought from the same Palm Beach catalogue. Clad in burgundy, olive, nectarine, coral, aqua, and plum, they bore a passing resemblance to migratory birds from different flocks gathered around a feeder. He introduced Billy as an old friend, not a player.

"Not a *poker* player, anyway," said Billy, giving Pellerin's hand a three-fingered shake.

Goess's eyes licked Jo head to toe. She didn't seem as anxious as I would have thought, or else she kept her anxiety contained. With Goess in the picture, my best guess was that Billy planned to humiliate Ruddie, then kill him. Whatever his plans, the odds against our surviving the evening had lengthened. I tried to think of an out, but nothing came to me. Ruddie shepherded us across the living room, a considerable acreage with a high ceiling, carpeted in a swirly blue pattern that was interrupted now and again by a sofa grouping or a stainless steel abstract sculpture—it reminded me of the showroom of an upscale car dealer, minus the cars. I wanted to cut Pellerin out of the herd and tell him about Goess, but the opportunity did not arise.

A dealer had been brought in for the occasion, a motherly brunette carrying some extra pounds, dressed in a tuxedo shirt and slacks; a thin, sleek Cubano was behind the bar, dispensing drinks with minimal comment. Some of the men seemed to have a prior relationship with the dealer; they cracked jokes at her expense, addressing her as Kim. Goess and Billy took chairs on opposite sides of the central trophy case, separating themselves from each other, and from Jo and I, who sat in the corner, with Pellerin facing us at the table. Once everyone was settled and a few last

pleasantries observed, Kim said, "The game is Texas Hold 'Em, gentlemen. No Limit. The buy-in is five hundred thousand. Play will run until eight AM, unless an extension is agreed upon. If you go bust, you can make a second buy-in, but not a third."

The buy-ins commenced, cash being traded for chips. The cash was placed in a lockbox and then wheeled off on a luggage cart by two of Ruddle's employees. This done, Kim dealt the first hand.

For the better part of an hour, some chips passed back and forth, but no serious damage was done and the men bantered amiably between hands, telling dumb stories about one another and chortling, huh huh huh, like apes at a grunt festival. As best I could judge, there were two dangerous players apart from Ruddle and Pellerin—a portly man with heavy bags under his eyes by the name of Carl, who rarely spoke other than to raise or check or call, and an ex-jock type with an Alabama accent, his muscles running to fat, whom everybody called Buster and treated with great deference, laughing loudly and long at his anecdotes, though they were none too funny. The remaining four were dead money, working their cards without discernable stratagem or skill.

"We can gossip and trade antes all night," said Ruddle, "but I call that a ladies' bridge tournament, not a poker game."

"I didn't notice you stepping up, Frank," said Pellerin. "You been betting like you playing with your mama's pin money."

The table shared a chuckle.

Ruddle took it good-naturedly, but there was an edge to his smile and I knew he couldn't wait to hurt Pellerin.

Truthfully, my mind was not on the game, but on Billy and Goess. The transfer of the lockbox to the vault made it clear that Billy's true interest did not lie in that direction. My uneasiness intensified and it must have showed, because Jo gave my hand a squeeze. The play remained less than aggressive until, several hands later, Pellerin check-raised Ruddle's bet after the flop by twenty thousand.

"I bid five clubs," he said, causing another outburst of laughter.

Having watched him play every day at the Seminole Paradise, I knew this was a move he had been setting up ever since he'd arrived in Florida. He'd backed off a lot of players with it in the casino and it usually signified a bluff, something of which Ruddle would be aware. Now, I thought, he might have a hand. The flop was the four of spades, the seven of spades, and the seven of clubs. Pellerin bet another twenty thousand. From the way Ruddle had bet before the flop, I figured him to be holding a second pair, probably queens or better. If Pellerin wasn't bluffing, he might have a third seven. Ruddle, after thinking it over, called the raise. Everyone else got out of the way. The turn card was the queen of hearts. Pellerin pushed out thirty thousand in chips.

"You got the nuts?" Ruddle asked him.

"There's one way to find out," said Pellerin.

Ruddle riffled a stack of chips and finally called. "Now we're playing poker," he said.

The river card was the eight of spades. With four spades face up, both men had the possibility of a flush draw.

"I hate to do this to our gracious host, but I'm all in," Pellerin said.

"Call," said Ruddle. He didn't wait for Pellerin to show his hand—he

slapped his hole cards down on the table. Ace of diamonds and ace of spades. He had made an ace-high flush.

"You got the high flush, all right," Pellerin turned over his cards. "But mine's all in a row."

His hole cards were the five and six of spades, filling an eight-high straight flush.

The other players responded with shocked "Damns!" and "Holy craps!" Having lost close to half a million on the turn of cards, when there were only a couple of hands that could have beaten him, four sevens or a gut-shot straight flush, Ruddle was speechless. Pellerin had been lucky, but he had played the hand so that if the cards were friendly, he was in position to take advantage.

"If you'd re-raised on the turn, I would have folded. Shit, all I had was a draw." Pellerin began to stack his winnings. "Who was it said Hold 'Em's a science, but No Limit is an art? I must be one hell of an artist." He waved at the bartender. "Jack Black on the rocks. A double."

I expected Billy to be angry that Pellerin had moved on Ruddle so early in the evening, and I scrunched down so I could see him through the glass of the trophy case. He was sitting placidly, as if watching an episode of *The Amazing Race*, but I detected a little steam in the way his neck was bowed. Jo caught my eye and we exchanged a disconcerted vibe.

"Yes sir," Pellerin said expansively. "You might have whupped a bunch of Leroys and Jim Bobs down in Tunica, but this here's a different world, Frank."

Ruddle stood and, walking stiffly, left the room. Some of the other gamblers followed him, doubtless to commiserate over the bad beat. Kim called for a short break, and Billy stepped over to me and whispered, "What's he doing?"

"I'll find out," I said.

Billy's nose was an inch from my face—I could smell his breath mints. "I want the bastard to suffer! You tell him that!"

He went to join the commiserators. I pulled Pellerin aside and told him Billy was upset.

"He'll get his pound of flesh," said Pellerin. "This'll make it easier to manage the game. Ruddle will play tight for a while, and that gives me time to clear out the garbage."

"Don't do anything stupid," I whispered. "The guy in the camel blazer's a hired killer. I know him from New Orleans. Alan Goess."

"Is he? No lie?" His eyes flicked toward Goess and he smiled. "Hey, guy!" he said to Goess. "How they hanging?"

For a split second, the real Alan Goess came out from behind his rattlesnake deadboy guise, and I got a hint of his underlying madness; then the curtain closed and he said, "I'm doing well. So are you, from the looks of things."

"Looks can be deceiving," said Pellerin. "Yea, I am a troubled soul, but a firm believer in the Light and the Resurrection. How about yourself?"

"'Fraid not," said Goess. "I've never yet seen anyone come back."

"You just think you haven't," Pellerin said, and would have said more, but I hustled him out of the room and told him not to screw around with Goess.

"I got it under control, boss," he said. "I know exactly what I'm doing."

In the living room, Billy was having a chat with Carl, and Buster had cornered Jo. The other players were huddled up around Ruddle, patting him on the back, saying that Pellerin had been lucky, encouraging him to get back in the game. I gazed out the window toward the *Mystery Girl*, floating serene and white under the dock lights, impossibly distant.

Ruddle had had more chips than Pellerin, so the beat hadn't wiped him out; but he didn't have enough left to compete and he made a second buy-in of a quarter-million. The game resumed, albeit with a less convivial atmosphere. The room, small already, seemed to have shrunk, and the men sat hunched and quietly tense under the hanging lamp. Conversation was at a minimum . . . except for Pellerin. He drank heavily and whenever he won a pot he'd offer up a disparaging comment, engaging the ire of one and all. After taking forty grand off Buster, he said, "Where'd you learn poker, old son? From some guy named Puddin' in the jock dorm?"

Buster said, "Why don't you shut up and play cards?"

This notion was seconded by some of the others.

"In case you didn't notice, I'm playing cards," said Pellerin. "Damned if I can figure out what you're playing."

When Buster won a pot at his expense, Pellerin said, "Jesus must love a hillbilly fool."

I had to admire Pellerin. Though he had a distinct advantage in the game, it took great skill to manipulate the fortunes of six other poker players. Ruddle gradually built his stack, winning back the majority of the chips he had lost. His mood grew sunnier and he began to joke around with the table, but when involved in a hand with Pellerin, he was barely civil, speaking brusquely if at all. By one o'clock, two lesser players had been driven out and another was teetering on the brink, down a quarter of a million, pushing in antes and mucking his cards hand after hand. At three-thirty, Buster decided to cut his losses and withdrew.

"Thanks for the contribution, Busted . . . I mean, Buster," said Pellerin, grinning hugely. "We going to miss you, sure enough."

Kim called for another break and everyone made for a buffet that had been set up in the living room. Billy gave me a thumbs-up before heading over to the food. Standing apart from the rest, I told Jo about Goess and said that we had better do something soon or else I didn't like our chances.

"I thought we were going to wait until the last minute," she said.

"Far as I can see, this is the last minute."

She seemed amazingly calm. "I have go to the restroom. Just wait, okay? Don't do anything."

I watched her cross the living room, her long legs working the dress, hips rolling under the silky fabric, and then went back into the card room, where Pellerin was playing with his chips.

"If you've got something in mind," I said, "now might be the time to try it."

"Right now?"

"Whenever you see an opening."

He nodded. "All right. Y'all be ready. I'll give you a warning before-

hand." He picked up a stack of chips and let them dribble through his fingers. "Life ain't never as sweet as it appears," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just my personal philosophy."

"Fuck a bunch of personal philosophy. Get your mind right! Okay? When it comes time, I'll handle Goess."

"You take care of Billy. Leave Goess to me."

"You think you up to it?"

"It's a done deal," he said.

"What are you going to do?"

He spread the deck of cards face-up on the table and started nudging out the painted cards with the tip of his forefinger.

"Tell me!" I said.

"I believe I may to have to violate his personal space," said Pellerin.

I would have inquired of him further, but people began to wander back into the card room, carrying plates of food. Ruddle, Kim, and Carl took their places at the table. Jo patted my arm and gave me a steady look that said everything's okay, but it was not okay and she knew it . . . unless she had slipped gears and gone to Jesus. Billy, Goess, and a straggler came in. I sought to make eye contact with Billy, but he stared straight ahead. The game resumed three-handed, with Carl winning a decent pot. Pellerin made his bets blind, not bothering to check his cards, tossing in chips until after the flop, and then folding. As Kim was about to deal a second hand, he stood up and said, "Gentlemen. And ladies. Before we begin what promises to be an exhilarating conclusion to the evening, I'd like to propose a toast."

He lifted his glass. With his left hand, I noticed. His right hand was afflicted with a palsy, the fingers making movements that, though they were spasmodic, at the same time seemed strangely deft.

"Frank," Pellerin went on. "You have my deepest gratitude for hosting this lovely occasion. I'd love to stick around and pluck your feathers, but . . . duty calls. I want to thank you all for being so patient with my abusive personality. Which, I should say, is not entirely my own. It comes to you courtesy of the folks at Darden, where your good health is our good business."

"Are you through?" Ruddle asked.

"In a minute." Pellerin's voice acquired a sarcastic veneer. "To Miz Jo-cundra Verret. For her ceaseless and unyielding devotion. You'll always be my precious sunflower. And to Jack Lamb, who—sad to say—is probably the closest thing to a friend I have in this world. What are friends for if not to fuck over each other? Huh, Jack?"

"Sit your ass down," said Carl. "You're drunk."

"True enough." Pellerin gestured with his glass, sloshing liquor across the table. "But I'm not done yet."

Billy gave a squawk and leaped from his chair, backing away from Goess. I leaned forward and had a look. Goess's eyes bulged, his hands gripped the arms of the chair, his face was red, glistening with sweat, and his neck was corded. He began to shake, as if in the grip of a convulsion.

"To Mister Alan Goess, who's about to burst into flames!" Pellerin raised his glass high. "And let's not forget Billy Pitch, at whose behest I came here tonight. I hear you like those reality shows, Billy. Are you digging on this one?"

The Cuban bartender had seen enough—he ran from the room. Buster

started toward Goess, perhaps thinking he could render assistance, and Pellerin said, "Y'all keep back, now. Combustion's liable to be sudden. Truth is, I suspect he's already dead."

"It's a trick," said Carl. "The guy's faking it."

Pellerin whipped off his sunglasses. "What you think, Tubby? Am I faking this, too?"

Green flashes were plainly visible in his eyes.

Ruddle threw himself back from the table. "Jesus!"

"Not hardly." Pellerin laughed. "You folks familiar with voodoo? No? Better prepare yourself, then. Because voodoo is most definitely in the house."

Everyone in the room was frozen for a long moment, their attention divided between Goess and Pellerin. Goess's skin blistered, the blisters bursting, leaking a clear serum, and then there came a soft *whumpf*, a big pillowy sound, and he began to burn. Pale yellow flames wreathed his body, licking up and releasing an oily smoke. I smelled him cooking. Kim screamed, and people were shouting, crowding together in the doorway, seeking to escape. Billy dipped a hand into his voluminous hip pocket. I grabbed his shoulder, spun him about, and drove my fist into his prunish face, knocking him into a trophy case, shattering the glass. His mouth was bleeding, his scalp was lacerated, but he was still conscious, still trying to extricate something from his pocket. I kicked him in the gut, again in the head, and bent over his inert body, fumbled in the pocket and removed a switchblade and a platinum-and-diamond money clip that pinched a thick fold of bills. The clip was probably worth more than the bills. With millions resting in Ruddle's vault, I felt stupid mugging him for chump change. Jo's hands fluttered about my face. She said something about listening to reason, about waiting, but I was too adrenalized to listen and too anxious to wait. I gave Billy a couple of more kicks that wedged him under the wreckage of the trophy case, and then, shoving Jo ahead of me, glancing back at Goess, who sat sedately now, blackening in the midst of his pyre, I went out into the living room.

Ruddle's security was nowhere to be seen, but Ruddle, Kim, and the rest were bunched together against the picture window, their egress blocked by tracks of waist-high flame that crisscrossed the blue carpet, dividing the room into dozens of neat diamond-shaped sections. It was designer arson, the fire laid out in such a precise pattern it could have been the work of a performance artist with a gift for pyrotechnics. Beside a burning sofa from which smoke billowed, Pellerin appeared to be orchestrating the flames, conducting their swift, uncanny progress with clever movements of his fingers, sending trains of fire scooting across the floor, adding to his design. I recalled the scorch mark on his bedroom wall. Along with everyone else in this lunatic circumstance, Pellerin had been holding something back. I thought if you could see the entirety of the pattern he was creating, it would be identical to one of the *veves* he had sketched on the napkin that day by the pool. I maneuvered as close to him as I dared and shouted his name. He ignored me, continuing to paint his masterpiece. The fire crackled, snacking on the rug, gnawing on the furniture, yet the noise wasn't sufficiently loud to drown out the cries of Ruddle and his guests. Some were egging on Buster and another guy, who were preparing to pick up a sofa and ram it against the window. I shout-

ed again—again Pellerin ignored me. Bursts of small arms fire, like popcorn popping, sounded from the front of the house.

Billy's people, I told myself.

"Did you hear that?" Jo clutched my arm.

I bellowed at Pellerin. He looked at me from, I'd estimate, twenty-five feet away, and it was not a human look. His features were strained, his lips drawn back, stretched in a delirious expression, part leer and part delighted grin. That's how it seemed, that he had been made happy beyond human measure, transported by the perception of some unnatural pleasure, as if the fire were for him a form of release. I was frightened of him, yet I felt a connection, some emotional tether, and I was afraid *for* him as well. I urged him to come with us, to make a try for the boat. He stared as if he didn't recognize me, and then his smile lost its inhuman wideness.

"Come on, man!" I said. "Let's go!"

He shook his head. "No way."

"What the hell are you doing? You're going to die here!"

His smile dimmed and I thought his resolve was weakening, that he would break through the fences of flame separating us and join us in flight; but all he did was stand there. Behind me, I heard an explosive crash as the window gave way; the gunfire grew louder.

"Listen!" I said. "That's Billy's men out there! You want them to catch you?"

"That ain't Billy! Don't you believe it!" He pointed at Jo. "Ask her!"

Despite the high ceiling, smoke was beginning to fill the room, drifting down around us, and Jo was bent over, coughing.

"This shit isn't working for me." Pellerin seemed to be talking mostly to himself. "It's just not acceptable."

I understood what he meant, but I entreated him once more to come with us. He shook his head again, an emphatic no. Turning his attention to the fire, he performed a series of complex gestures. The latticework of flames surrounding us appeared to bend away from his fingers and a path opened, leading toward the kitchen. The heat was growing intolerable—I had no choice but to abandon him. My arm around Jo's waist, I started along the path, but she panicked, fighting against me, scratching my face and slapping the side of my head. I hit her on the point of the jaw, picked her up in a fireman's carry as she sagged, and broke into a stumbling run.

The sky was graying as I emerged from the house and staggered across the lawn; the *Mystery Girl* lurched in my vision with each step, appearing to recede at first, as though I were on a treadmill that kept carrying me backward. The small arms fire had intensified—at least a dozen weapons were involved. I had no idea what was happening, and not much of an idea where I was going. If the boat had gas, I thought I would head north and search for the entrance to the intercoastal waterway, try and make it to Tampa where I had friends. But if Billy had survived, Tampa would not be safe and I didn't know where to go. Not New Orleans, that was for sure. I could have kicked myself for not shooting the scummy little weasel when I had the chance.

The planks resounded to my footsteps as I pounded along the dock, and the smells of creosote and brine hit me like smelling salts. When I reached the *Mystery Girl*, I laid Jo in the stern. She moaned, but didn't wake. I

climbed the ladder to the pilot deck, keyed the ignition, and was exultant when the engine turned over. The needle on the fuel gauge swung up to register an almost-full tank. I pulled away from the dock and opened up the throttle. There was a light chop on the water close to shore, but farther out, beyond the sandbar, the surface was smooth and glassy, with gentle swells. Crumbling banks of fog blanketed the sea ahead. Once inside them we'd be safe for a while. I wondered what had gotten into Pellerin, whether it was Ogun Badagris or simply a madness attached to having been brought back to life by bacteria that infested your brain and let you use more of it. Maybe there wasn't any difference between the two conditions. Jo's first slow-burner had gone out in much the same way, in the midst of a huge *veve*, so you were led to conclude that some pathology was involved . . . and yet it might be the pathology of a god trapped in a human body. I remembered how he'd smiled, leering at his fiery work, and how that smile had planed seamlessly down into a human expression, as if the man he was had merely been the god diminished by the limitations of the flesh.

I cleared my mind of ontological speculation and focused on practical matters, but when I tried to think about what we were going to do once we reached Tampa, it was like trying to walk on black ice and I wound up staring at the flat gray sea, listening to the pitch of the engine. I zoned out and began to think about Pellerin again. Formless thoughts, the kind you have when you're puzzled by something to the point that you can't even come up with a question to ask and are reduced to searching the database, hoping that some fact will provoke one.

I had all but forgotten about Jo and when she called out to me, I turned toward the sound of her voice, full of concern. She came scrambling up the ladder and, once she had solid footing, told me to cut the engines, having to shout to make herself heard. The wind lashed her hair about, and she held it in place with one hand.

"Are you crazy?" I gestured at the fog bank. "Once we're into the fog, we'll be okay."

"We'll never get away! If I thought we could, I'd go with you. You know that, don't you?"

"You are going with me," I said. "What's the problem?"

She didn't answer, and I glanced over at her.

She had moved away from me and was standing with her legs apart, aiming a small automatic with a silver finish. A .25 caliber Beretta. With that black cocktail dress on, she might have stepped out of a Bond movie. She had to be wearing a thigh holster. The unreality of it all tickled me and I couldn't repress a laugh.

"Where'd you get that thing?" I asked her. "Out of a cereal box?"

She fired, and a bullet dug a furrow in the control console an inch from my hand.

I recoiled from the console. "Christ!"

"I'm sorry," she said.

She looked sorry. Her make-up was mussed. The heat of the fire had caused her to sweat, and sweat had dragged a mascara shadow from the corner of her eye, simulating a tear. She told me again to cut the engines, and this time I complied. The boat lifted on a light swell. I heard the faint

cries of seagulls—they sounded like the baying of tiny, trebly hounds. I heard another noise, then. Two dark blue helicopters were approaching from the south.

"Who the hell is that?" I shouted.

"Calm down. Please! This is . . ." The wind drifted hair across her face; she brushed it aside and said weakly, "It's the only way. They're relentless, they keep coming after you."

"You did this? You told them where we were?"

"They always knew! They never went away! Don't you get it?"

"You knew the whole time? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know. Not for sure, not at first. And what good would it have done? You didn't listen to Doctor Crain."

"I would have listened to you," I said.

One of the helicopters positioned itself off the port side of the *Mystery Girl*; the side door had been slid back and someone in harness sat in the opening. I couldn't see what he was doing. The other helicopter hovered above the boat. A gilt script D was painted on the nacelle.

"I love you, Jack," Jo said.

"Yeah, uh-huh."

"I do! Back at the hotel . . . they contacted me. They were going to step in, but I convinced them to keep the experiment going."

"The experiment. This was an experiment?"

"I told them we might learn more about Josey if he went through with the game. Maybe that was wrong of me, but I wanted some time with you."

I was unable to line up all the trash she'd told me about her mother, how it had warped her, with her capacity for betrayal. Yet what she had said smacked of a childish willfulness and a clinical dispatch that, I realized, functioned as a tag-team in her personality. Until that moment, I had not understood how dangerous these qualities made her.

"I can lose them in the fog," I said.

"You can't. You don't know them."

"I'm damn well going to try. You think they'll let me go after what I've seen? They just wiped out twenty people!"

"I'm sure they didn't kill them all."

"Oh . . . well. Fuck! That's all right, then."

I punched in the ignition; the engine sputtered and caught, rumbling smoothly.

"Don't, Jack! Please!"

"I'm fucking dead if they catch me. Do you understand? I am dead!"

The barrel of the automatic wavered.

"You're not going to shoot me," I said.

I pushed the throttle forward. Jo said again, "Don't," and I felt a blow to my back, a wash of pain. I was out of it for a while, and when I was able to gather my senses, I found myself lying on the deck, with my head jammed up against the base of the control console. I knew I'd been shot, but it felt like the bullet had come from something larger than a .25. The guy in the harness, maybe. I was hurting some, but a numb feeling was setting in. It was a chore to concentrate. My thoughts kept slipping away. Jo knelt beside me. I locked on to her face. Looking at her steadied me. "Did you . . ." I said. "Did you shoot. . . ?"

"Don't talk," she said.

Silhouetted against the gray sky, a man was being lowered from the helicopter overhead, along with a metal case that dangled from a hook beside him. It seemed as big as a coffin. The sight confused me visually, and in other ways as well. I closed my eyes against it.

Jo laid a hand on my cheek. The touch cooled the embers of my anger, my disappointment with her, and I was overwhelmed with sentiment. Bits of memory surfaced, whirled, dissolved. She lay down on the deck beside me. She became my sky. Her face hanging above me blotted out the chopper and the man descending.

"I'll take care of you, I promise," she said.

Her brown eyes were all that was holding me.

A gurgling came from inside my chest. She started raving, then. Getting angry, swearing vengeance, weeping. It was like she thought I'd passed out, like I wasn't there. Half of it, I didn't understand. She said they would regret what they'd made her do, she'd make certain I remembered everything, and I would help her make them pay. I didn't recognize her, she was so possessed by pain and fury. She laid her head on my chest. I wanted to tell her the weight was oppressive, but I couldn't form the words. The lengths of her hair were drowning me. Her voice, the helicopter rotors, and the fading light merged into a gray tumult, an incoherence.

"Jack . . ."

. . . *Jack* . . .

A jolt, as of electricity, to the back of my neck.

Jack . . . Jack Lamb . . .

My eyelids fluttered open.

A gray ocean surrounded me, picked out by vague shapes.

Jack Lamb . . . Jack . . .

Another jolt, more intense than the first. I tried to move, but I was very weak and I succeeded only in turning my head. Someone passed across my field of vision, accompanied by a perfumey scent. Wanting to catch their notice, I made a scratchy noise in my throat. The effort caused me to pass out.

Jack . . .

"Jack? Are you awake?" A woman's voice.

"Yeah," I said, my tongue thick, throat raw.

Something was inserted between my lips and a cool liquid soothed the rawness. My chest hurt. My whole body hurt.

"How's that? Better?" The voice had a familiar ring.

"I can't see," I said. "Everything's a blur."

"The doctor says you'll be seeing fine in a few days."

I asked for more water and, after I had drunk, I said, "I know you . . . don't I?"

"Of course. Jocundra . . . Jo." A pause. "Your partner. We live together. Don't you remember?"

"I think. Yeah."

"You've been through a terrible ordeal. Your memory will be hazy for awhile."

"What happened to me?"

"You were shot. The important thing is, you're going to be fine."

"Who shot me? Why . . . what happened?"

"I'll tell you soon. I promise. You don't need the stress now."

"I want to know who shot me!"

"You have to trust me," she said, placing a hand on my chest. "There's psychological damage as well as physical. We have to go cautiously. I'll tell you when you're strong enough. Won't you trust me 'til then?"

I asked her to come closer.

Something swam toward me through the gray. I made out a crimson mouth and enormous brown eyes. Gradually, the separate features resolved into a face that, though blurred, was indisputably open and lovely.

"You're beautiful," I said.

"Thank you." A pause. "It's been awhile since you told me that."

Her face withdrew. I couldn't find her in the murk. Anxious, I called out. "I'm here," she said. "I'm just getting something."

"What?"

"Cream to rub on your chest and shoulders. It'll make you feel better."

She sat on the bed—I felt the mattress indent—and she began massaging me. Each caress gave me a shock, albeit gentler than the ones I had felt initially. Soft hands spread the cream across my chest and I began to relax, to feel repentant that I had neglected her. I offered apology for doing so, saying that I must have been preoccupied.

Her lips brushed my forehead. "It's okay. Actually, I'm hopeful . . ."

"Hopeful? About what?"

"It's nothing."

"No, tell me."

"I'm hoping some good will come of all this," she said. "We've been having our problems lately. And I hope this time we spend together, while you recuperate, it'll make you remember how much I love you."

I groped for her hand, found it. We stayed like that a while, our fingers mixing together. A white shape melted up from the grayness. I strained to identify it and realized it was her breast sheathed in white cloth.

"I'm up here," she said, laughter in her voice, and leaned closer so I could see her face again. "Do you feel up to answering a few questions? The doctor said I should test your memory. So we can learn if there's been any significant loss."

"Yeah, okay. I'm feeling more together now."

I heard papers rustling and asked what she was doing.

"They gave me some questions to ask. I can't find them." More rustling. "Here they are. The first one's a gimme. Do you recall your name?"

"Jack," I said confidently. "Jack Lamb."

"And what do you do? Your profession?"

I opened my mouth, ready to spit out the answer. When nothing came to me, I panicked. I probed around in the gray nothing that seemed to have settled over my brain, beginning to get desperate. She touched the inside of my wrist, a touch that left a trail of sparkling sensation on my skin, and told me not to force it. And then I saw the answer, saw it as clearly as I might see a shining coin stuck in silt at the bottom of a well, the first of a horde of memories waiting to be unearthed, a treasure of anecdote and event.

Firmly, and with a degree of pride as befitted my station, I said, "I'm a financier." ○

WHITHER THE HARD STUFF?

HORIZONS

by Mary Rosenblum

Tor, \$24.95

ISBN: 0765316048

BLINDSIGHT

by Peter Watts

Tor, \$25.95

ISBN: 0765312182

INFOQUAKE

by David Louis Edelman

Pyr, \$15.00

ISBN: 1591024420

SPEARS OF GOD

by Howard V. Hendrix

Del Rey, \$14.95

ISBN: 0345455983

By now, surely every reader of this column and most people at all interested in the "genre" know that prose science fiction as opposed to "SF" is in dire straits. It's being squeezed from one side by the abundance of films, TV shows, video games, and so forth purveying its tropes, images, and thematic material to wider audiences than any book is likely to reach, and on the other by the former fantasy tail that has long since come to wag the "SF" genre publishing dog.

Writers of science fiction in general who have no real interest in switching to fantasy are struggling to survive as fantasy dominates the lists of SF publishers, the SF racks in the stores, and sales. Those publishers who care are struggling to keep it alive by trying to locate and reach or

create a readership to replace aging diehard fans and kids who read less and less of anything at all in order to keep it commercially viable.

Thus far the results are not in, an optimist might say, because the packaging, marketing, and publicity modalities have not yet been discovered, or if they have, not yet employed. For after all, the turning to the writing of science fiction by so-called "mainstream writers" with at least commercial success would seem to indicate that the demographics are there, especially since much of their stuff, while perhaps better written than most of what "science fiction writers" turn out, is pretty pallid and primitive by thematic, extrapolative, speculative, and scientifically knowledgeable standards.

But what of "hard science fiction"? The truth is that hard science fiction has just about always been a minority taste even among science fiction readers. Others have had and may still have more stringent definitions than I, involving a certain snobbishness by devotees of the "hard" physical sciences such as physics, chemistry, and astronomy directed against such "soft" sciences as biology, psychology, and ecology, but I prefer a more inclusive definition.

As far as I'm concerned, hard science fiction has a primary restrictive definition and a secondary prescriptive definition.

Restrictively, hard science fiction must take care not to violate the currently known laws of mass-energy; if it doesn't, it's not hard science fiction.

Prescriptively, it should be fiction in which technological change, or a scientific or technological question or speculation is central or at least important to the thematic point, the dramatic thrust, the action of the story, the personal lives of its characters, and ideally all of them.

I think that's a pretty inclusive definition of the literary sub-genre. But just how wide and numerous is even the current maximum potential readership that might want to read such stuff and enjoy it if it did?

Think about it. Those with no interest in science and technology per se, or even the impact of science and technology on culture and consciousness, are not about to be interested in reading hard science fiction or enjoy it if they happen upon it by accident, and the scientifically illiterate aren't even going to be able to understand it.

In a society where the distinction between astronomy and astrology is probably blurry in more minds than not, where more people give credence to the existence of angels than to the evolutionary process, where very few viewers see anything wrong in spacecraft executing banking turns in a vacuum, where school systems and textbook publishers find themselves forced to give equal time to "creationism," and where the teaching of science in primary and secondary schools is itself in steep decline, surely the potential readership for hard science fiction must be dwindling even faster than that for science fiction in general.

So can "hard science fiction" survive? And if so, what does it have to become in order to survive? Does its survival really matter to anyone but a dwindling coterie of hardcore devotees? And just what do we *now* mean by hard SF? Has it mutated? Is this a good thing or a bad thing, or both?

The first two novels we will consider here, *Blindsight* by Peter Watts and *Horizons* by Mary Rosenblum, surely answer the first question in the affirmative, since at least they exist and have been published.

Blindsight takes place on a spaceship out beyond Pluto on a mission to make first contact with aliens, at least in the present tense front story. *Horizons* takes place mostly on a space station. Neither of them presents events that would seem to violate the presently known laws of mass-energy, and there are technical and/or scientific questions intimately involved with the stories told by both.

So it would not only be difficult but Talmudically pointless to attempt to concoct a definition of "hard science fiction" narrow enough to exclude both of these novels. Though I suppose there might still be geeky fan-nish dinosaurs who would exclude the Rosenblum on the grounds that it is centered on space *technology* rather than space "science" and squishy biology rather than macho physics.

But *Horizons* certainly does not violate the *restrictive* definition of hard science fiction. Much more of it than not takes place in an orbital space station of the sort that has become a consensus artifact of the fictional future; a city in space whose culture (or cultures) is diverging from those of the Earth, more or less self-contained and autarchic except for some vital significant exceptions, growing its own food supply hydroponically. It is mostly reached from the planetary surface by space elevator, and spins about an axis to supply various degrees of artificial gravity to its different levels.

Okay, maybe I have a little dinosaur in me, too. Problems of material strength and mass aside, connecting the ground to an orbital station

via cable would mean whipping the thing around through the whole atmosphere daily to meteorological results few who utilize this fictional device care to contemplate. And of course it could only work at all going to a station in geosynchronous orbit. "Spin gravity" is not gravity at all, but centrifugal force emulating gravity, as the astronaut Wally Shirra once pointed out to me in sarcastic good humor. Meaning that your head is moving at a different speed than your feet, meaning unless the moment-arm is a score or so miles long, the coriolis forces are going to have you puking your guts out.

These two cavils are admittedly nit-picking, but just the sorts of nits that hardcore devotees of hard science fiction enjoy picking. It's part of the game. But on the other hand, these minor scientific faux pas are on a level sufficiently allowable for Rosenblum's artificial space station gravity and its ground-to-space-transportation system to be acceptable in a hard science fiction novel. They have been used many times before, as necessary literary license, for science has long since learned that humans cannot really thrive in zero-g indefinitely.

Or can they?

And if they can, will they really be "human"?

Which is where I would argue that *Horizons* fulfills at least my *prescriptive* definition of hard science fiction. Children born and raised in the zero-g hub have some fairly drastic phenotype adaptations to living without gravity, and this "mutation" is spreading to other levels of the space station. But is it a mutation?

Apparently not, because their DNA does not differ from the human norm. Rosenblum does not go into it too perilously deeply, but the idea is that

under these altered environmental conditions the same genotype is expressing a different phenotype. Is this scientifically possible? Is this an alternate mode of speciation? Is this speciation at all?

It's an arguable and therefore interesting scientific question. Think of how movement north by homo sapiens out of Africa into less sunny climes resulted in reduced melanin concentrations in the skin. Adaptation by mutation and natural selection or by the same genes expressing an adapted phenotype? Or is that just a more sophisticated version of discredited Lysenkoism? And if it is a form of politically incorrect Lysenkoism, does that necessarily render it scientifically impossible?

This is the sort of hard science fictional speculation that would have easily made sufficient material for a short story or even a novelette in John W. Campbell's *Astounding*, but even then it would have needed at least some sort of action or at least adversarial plot to become the McGuffin of a hard science fiction novel.

In the end, it does prove to be the scientific and thematic McGuffin of *Horizons*, but these days, blowing up a short story centered on a scientific conundrum into a hard science fiction novel with action loops and an obstructing villain or two will not do. A modern—or if you prefer post-modern—hard science fiction novel must do more than that to attract and hold anything but a miniscule readership.

It must be not so much a hard science fiction novel as *something else* that also satisfies the parameters of hard science fiction. *Horizons* does this successfully, at least in literary terms, by being a political thriller, a spy novel of sorts, and one with characterological and moral depths, even

a business novel in a way, the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

The novel is set in a future where there are still nations and plenty of national chauvinism and racism, but kept more or less in check and overseen by a World Council with far bigger teeth than the present United Nations. There are several habitat stations, or Platforms as they are called in *Horizons*, politically semi-autonomous up to a certain point, in thrall to Earthside governments or corporate interests beyond it, or to what amount to tongs of a sort. For this is a future in which East Asia in general and greater China in particular are not only in the ascendancy but have gone somewhat economically, politically, and culturally retro.

The main protagonist, Ahni Huang, is both a scion (scioness?) of one of the most powerful of these neo-tongs and an experienced operative loaded with various nano-enhancements, a natural choice therefore to be sent by her father to the Platform where her brother was murdered, find out who dunnit and why, and take the appropriate vengeance.

There she falls in with and eventually in love with Dane, master of the zero-g hydroponic farmstead, secretly sheltering a clan of the beings? people? mutants? humans? adapted to life without gravity.

Which of the above they really are—or, more to the point, as which of the above will baseline humans treat them—is the core of a story with complex machinations by a complex cast of well-rendered characters, a revolutionary independence movement by the citizens of the Platforms, considerable equally well-rendered action hugger-mugger, and a difficult moral question that Mary Rosenblum may answer to her own satis-

As someone who has been writing a column and contributed fiction to *Asimov's* for pretty close to as long as it has been in existence, I congratulate the magazine for having survived three decades of the literary history of science fiction, and playing a central part in it. I pay homage to the successive editorial staffs, and particularly the present one, valiantly carrying forth the tradition and the mission in a good deal less than easy times. Live long and prosper. Or at least live long.

—Norman Spinrad

faction, and that of more readers than not—myself included—but probably not everyone.

Whether these descendants of baseline humans have adapted to permanent life in zero gravity by genetic mutation or adaptive alternate phenotype expression ends up being emotionally irrelevant. For one way or the other, they *are* better adapted to life beyond the planetary surface, and therefore they are either the future of space-going homo sapiens or our successor species. Rosenblum leads the reader to the politically correct emotional response of acceptance, but one wonders whether homo erectus or neanderthalus would have felt particularly welcoming of the advent of homo sapiens if they understood we would succeed them.

Horizons, then is a successful example, at least in literary terms, of how old-fashioned hard science fiction must adapt to the current environment if it is to escape the tar pits to live long and prosper. Fortunately this evolution seems not to be particularly threatening to the previous literary phenotype thereof. For what

we have here is a novel that fulfills the *positive* prescriptions for true hard science fiction while becoming something more that it must evolve into in order to survive commercially.

Hard science fiction plus.

Plus *what* doesn't really matter.

In *Horizons*, Mary Rosenblum adds a complex thriller-type political plot, a revolution, a family feud of sorts, a love story of sorts, and so forth, to a thematic core that probably would have sold a novelette to John W. Campbell. He might not have agreed with Rosenblum's thematic conclusion, but he certainly would have enjoyed arguing about it, as would his readers.

But this is not the Golden Age of *Astounding*, or even the Space Age of *Analog*. And like it or not—and given what it says about the declining state of interest in and understanding of scientific matters and the true moral questions they raise, I certainly do not—enthusiastic readers for hard science fiction without a plus have themselves become an endangered species. It's an open question whether there are still enough of them around for such stuff to remain commercially publishable.

I do not really count myself a passionate and adamant defender of *pur sang* hard science fiction. But I certainly know that even such science fiction without additional crowd-pleasing elements can be literarily serious, well-written, exciting, and enjoyable to those intellectually equipped to enjoy it and with the inclination to do so, even if only occasionally.

An elite literature for an elite readership.

Politically incorrect or not, there, I've said it, and like it or not, it's become true.

Yet I would contend that not only

does such a literature deserve to survive, but if it is in the process of becoming commercially unpublishable in this culture, it's a very ominous sign for a lot more than science fiction publishing. It casts doubt on the continuation of the upwardly evolving scientific and technological dynamic that has kept so-called "Western Civilization" from ossifying like most every other civilization that has arisen on this planet.

Certainly at the very least something of real intellectual and literary value would be lost if there were not enough potential readers around to make something like Peter Watts' *Blindsight* publishable, and therefore in the end writeable. And what such a loss would indicate about the state of the cultural union would be much, much worse.

In *Blindsight*, the mysterious appearance and then disappearance of a multitude of fiery objects in the skies of a future Earth, followed by the detection by an AI probe of a large alien artifact out beyond Pluto, causes the powers-that-be to send a manned mission out there to find out what's what and take appropriate destructive action should it prove prudently necessary.

It's a long way, a voyage of years, and what is sent is a small crew in suspended animation. A military type. A single human body containing deliberately created multiple personalities to serve as a linguist and cultural anthropologist, among other things. A cyborgly enhanced biologist. For a dictatorial team leader whose will must be obeyed, a vampire, whose genotype was resurrected from extinction by "paleogenetics."

And Siri Keeton, a man half of whose brain has been removed and replaced by circuitry for medical reasons, who is the novel's first person

narrator, and whose role in the mission is to be just that for the leadership back on Earth—a supposedly neutral and detached observer sending back straight reportage of a strange kind, a kind of scientific interpreter who supposedly doesn't exactly have to understand what he's interpreting.

That's the set-up, and the rest of the novel consists of this team's confrontation with the alien object they find and its creators and denizens. A classic first contact novel. And certainly meant as hard science fiction by the author, since Watts, at least by his own lights, and quite convincingly by mine, has worked all this out with such scientific rigor, or at least *speculative* scientific rigor, that he appends seventeen pages of "notes and references" to the novel almost as if it were being submitted to a scientific journal. It can't get much more hard science fiction than that.

Siri Keeton's voice, which Watts adopts for his narration—which is to say this narrator's consciousness—is sophisticated, ironic, and interestingly alien in and of itself. The backstory of a failed love affair that he tells is illuminating, the interactions of this strange crew with its enigmatic vampire captain are fraught with tension, its other group dynamics are well-rendered, and there's plenty of physical action when they reach the alien artifact.

But the dramatic core of *Blindsight*, the plot-engine, remains a series of scientific questions, speculations, and discoveries. First concerning the physical nature of the huge habitat they discover, then the problem of penetrating it, followed by their encounters and conflicts with the lifeforms within it, the explication of their truly weird biology, and finally the revelation of just how alien these

creatures and their "civilization" really are on a level more profound than that of any other fictional aliens I, at least, have ever encountered.

Since this revelation is the thematic and dramatic climax of the novel, I will try not to reveal too much here, except to say that it delves very deeply indeed into the differences among intelligence, sentience, and consciousness, which of them is evolutionarily necessary for the arising of what, and that Watts' science fictional answers are so fascinatingly counter-intuitive that he seeks to justify them in "notes and references" as a scientist even though he does a fine job of it as a fiction writer in the body of the novel.

Clearly, then, Peter Watts' all-but declared literary ambition is to be a first class hard science fiction writer on the sophisticated literary level of Gregory Benford or Arthur C. Clarke. And with *Starfish*, *Maelstrom*, *Behemoth*, and now *Blindsight*, he demonstrates that he can achieve it.

But whether he or anyone else can build a commercially viable career on novels in which, however well-written and characterologically interesting, the speculative science is not only front and center, but provides the dramatic and thematic capper, is more questionable.

I consider myself a fairly scientifically sophisticated reader, and I found *Blindsight* challenging on that level. Challenging, but, in the end, fascinating and rewarding. The question is whether there are enough readers left out there who find that sort of experience actually enjoyable to continue to keep such fiction commercially publishable.

On the other hand, there do seem to be two species of hard science fiction arising that are actually *trendy*—that is, if you consider nanotechnology

gy and the virtual realities created in the cybersphere actual science. I've said that I prefer an inclusive definition of hard science fiction, so I suppose that I do, but with caveats.

My definition of hard SF requires that it not violate the known laws of mass and energy, and there I have some problems with some of the literary uses to which the concept of "nanotechnology" has been put.

Sure, you can create tiny little machines, but when you get them down to the molecular level, with their manipulators on the atomic level, how do they manipulate individual atoms without running afoul of quantum effects? And how can you possibly coordinate zillions of them to produce the sort of magic goo that can turn shit into shinola and dirt into spaceships? Where can there be sufficient data storage in the individual molecular-scale units to store the instructions to coordinate them?

I don't think it's even theoretically possible. I think this sort of nanotech is the literary equivalent of a magic wand. Literarily acceptable and quite useful, but hard science it ain't.

But when it comes to virtual realities, one cannot argue that they have even the potential for violating the laws of mass and energy, since their existence is by definition virtual—that is, outside the "real world," the physical universe in which such laws apply. And the fictional technology that creates them is already almost here in primitive form, lacking only the development of means of inputting full artificial sensory data—smell, feel, taste, kinesthetics, as well as sight and sound—directly into the relevant brain centers. And, indeed, this sort of thing has already been demonstrated on an experimental level.

However, there's something a little

fishy about the way virtual realities are so often used on a literary level. Writing *about* them, about their effects on consciousness and culture, is one thing, and can even be the material for hard science fiction. But setting a story entirely or almost entirely within virtual reality without dealing in a consequential way with the dichotomy between virtual existence and corporeal existence is really just using it as a frame for fantasy, a doorway into anything.

Not that there's anything literarily wrong with fantasy or surrealism, far from it. But what's the point in tarring it up as "science fiction," let alone "hard science fiction"?

David Louis Edelman's *Infoquake* is certainly science fiction by any remotely rational definition. It is certainly trendy, combining nanotechnology and sophisticated molecular level biology to create "bio/logics," a technology that not only cures and prevents diseases but allows one to program mood and mental state more or less at will. This in a future where corporeal and virtual realities are totally intertwined in quotidian day-to-day existence, and something called MultiReal is apparently going to allow people to choose what happens in base reality itself in the sequels.

And yes, there will be sequels. The cover forthrightly proclaims that *Infoquake* is "Volume I of the Jump 225 Trilogy." Whatever that is going to turn out to be, it will probably continue the story of Natch. Natch is the main protagonist, if not what one could call the hero, of *Infoquake*; a driven, unprincipled yet somehow charming rogue, a corporate climber, and entrepreneur of a company that both creates and markets trendy bio/logics in a media and advertising shark pond speeded up like a combination of the Internet, TV, the Niel-

sens, and the stock market on methedrene.

Perhaps his main minions, assistants, flunkies—Jara the marketer and Horvil the geeky wizard bio/logics programmer—will tag along through the next two volumes as well in this high-speed, high-spirited tale of high-powered and low-minded capitalist skullduggery, corporate and media warfare, and virtual reality manipulation. It's the sort of thing that would make a perfect serial for *Wired* magazine, given the nature of its ad base, if it ever decided to publish fiction.

Infoquake is certainly proceeding along several trendy vectors, not only in the microcosm of science fiction but in the macrocosm of the culture at large, which the former might follow in order to survive in the latter.

Literarily and commercially, the question of whether or not such a novel could be considered "hard science fiction of the post-modern kind" is ridiculously irrelevant. But to what extent this sort of technological extrapolation can be considered "science" at all seems centrally germane to the more important question of whether science fiction that fulfills the restrictive and perhaps even prescriptive definitions of hard science fiction can survive in a culture that does consider it science by mutating along the virtual reality vector.

This question might be moot if Edelman himself were just blowing rubber science smoke and mirrors. Instead, he is actually trying to make bio/logics and MultiReal seem scientifically credible in the manner of a hard science fiction writer and doing a pretty good job of it, at least when it comes to bio/logics.

Edelman seems to have convincing and convincingly detailed knowledge of the physiology and biochemistry of

the human nervous system down to the molecular level. And cares about making his fictional combination of molecular biology and nanotech credible to the point where the hard science credibility of the former makes the questionable nature of the latter seem more credible even to a nanotech skeptic like me. And after all, let's not kid ourselves too far, that's really the nature of the hard science fiction game; otherwise it wouldn't be hard science fiction.

"MultiReal," on the other hand, is something else again. And what it really is, or rather apparently is going to become in the sequels, is not that clear in *Infoquake*, where its mass marketing as a vague concept and subsequent launch as a rather vague product is the climax of the novel.

As near as I can make out, the idea is that if one has a means of running virtual reality simulations of all possible variations of a situation or action before it takes place—say, trying to throw a football downfield into the hands of a receiver, for example—one could then feed in all possible variations of all interacting elements of the starting conditions. This would enable one to know which combination would produce the exact desired result before you threw the football and have your throwing arm programmed accordingly by your bio/logics. And *voilà*, the football lands in the receiver's hands perfectly.

Edelman produces some reasonably cogent mathematical explication to make this seem to go down smoothly, while declaring that it somehow will put an end to the tyranny of causality. But how this is really going to work out is something even Natch, who is marketing it, doesn't really fathom at the end of *Infoquake*. This is an amusing point, but it is also somehow disturbing.

Infoquake is billed as the first novel in the "Jump 225" trilogy. But after you finish it you have no idea at all of what that is going to mean, any more than of what MultiReal is going to mean in literary terms. I suspect that it may turn out to be a "doorway into anything"—superpowers conjured up at will out of the bits and bytes, infinite replay of actions in order to come up with the desired result—in other words, magic.

I have no quarrel at all with the use of magic as a literary device in fantasy or surrealist fiction, where it has produced masterpieces. Magic masquerading as science and/or technology is another matter, and a graver one. And the better the masquerade, the more successful on a literary level, the more disturbing the transliterary consequences.

Case in point: *Spears of God* by Howard V. Hendrix. The publisher bills this novel as a near-future thriller. And that is indeed what it is, and an exceedingly complex one, so complex that on a spy-versus-spy level it is almost impossible to summarize, which is not necessarily a flaw in this sort of thing.

But thriller or not, it is also unequivocally a science fiction novel, with a scientific discipline and conundrum being the central McGuffin of the whole complex story. The science here is meteoritics. This is a branch not of astronomy but of geology—the study not quite that of meteors, but of meteorites, the rocks themselves after they have fallen to Earth. And science can't get any harder than that.

Right?

Well, in *Spears of God*, yes and no.

Hendrix goes to literally enormous length and almost literally exhaustive detail to, uh, ground this novel in the mineralogy of mete-

orites. Readers of this novel will learn more about the physical nature of the variations of meteorites not only than they wanted to know but—in my case, at least—than they thought was to be known. It's complete, it's impressive, and it seems obsessive to the point of becoming mind-numbing.

But while *Spears of God* is about meteorites, the mineralogy of meteorites, though it may take up thousands of words, is not at all what the novel is really about.

In this near-future world—and the action takes place in the United States, Arabia, South America—various agencies are collecting meteorites, and not always by legal or moral means. Why? That is the mystery that runs the plot engine of at least the first half of the book.

Two meteoriticists and sometime lovers in the process of searching for a special meteorite sacred to a perhaps legendary tribe atop an isolated mesa in South America find that it has been snatched by an act of genocide. They rescue four young survivors with arcane psychic powers linked to a fungus linked to the meteorite.

A general running a project to create enhanced supersoldiers is after them, the meteorite, and the fungus. There's the ex-lover of the male member of the couple that found the children involved. A man crazed by the death of his daughter at the hands of terrorists in Israel. The head of the National Security Agency. A bewilderingly complex cast of characters.

The plot is all over the place, or rather the multiple plot lines, meaning both the planet and the Byzantine machinations that take an overlong time to converge. It takes maybe three quarters of the book for it all to begin to coalesce into a climax

that brings it all together in an attempt by one of the several conflicting sides to steal the black meteorite embedded in the Ka'aba in Mecca and another to destroy the Ka'aba in order to provoke a nuclear war. . . .

It takes almost as long for the speculative threads underlying the plot to weave together. This is not necessarily a bad thing in a post-modern hard science fiction novel whose additional "plus" is such a thriller plot and structure, if they interweave and finally come together in the manner of a musical fugue. Structurally, Hendrix more or less pulls it off here; you learn enough of what this is more or less all about to more or less keep your interest in the multiple storylines going until they come together. And the plot lines have enough internal interest to keep you plowing through the heavy doses of scientific explication.

If that is what it really is.

Hendrix clearly knows his meteorites on a technical scientific level, and inflicts overlarge and overabundant expository lumps on the reader to demonstrate it. At first this seems like simply a hard science fiction writer too in love with his own scientific erudition—and indeed, maybe it is that, too. Hendrix also seems to know a lot about brain chemistry, fungal botany, and psychopharmacology, and lays all that on with a bit too heavy-handed a trowel, too. I happen to be not entirely unversed in these subjects, and what he lays on there seems to be the real deal, too.

However. . . .

In much the same mode and with much the same excess, Hendrix demonstrates, or seeks to demonstrate, that meteorites have been associated with mystical visions, the birth of religions, and so forth, all over the world since time immemori-

al. Okay, he seems to have done his homework here, too, and that such "stars fallen to the earth" would generate religious beliefs and mystical visions seems credible cultural anthropology. But for me at least this begins a slow slide down a slippery slope.

For Hendrix also applies this exhaustive, and somewhat exhausting to read, "scientific" explication to psychic and paranormal powers associated with meteorites, *generated* by meteorites, generated by galactic trans-spermial material brought to Earth by meteorites to bring about some sort of evolutionary quantum leap into a transcendent apotheosis. . . .

And this apotheosis arrives not only as a *deus ex machina* at the climax of the convergent complex series of thriller plotlines. Not only is it what brings that climax about, but it *is* the climax of the action plot, and well . . .

Well, revealing any more would be going too far.

Now don't get me wrong. It would be the height of hypocrisy for the author of *The Void Captain's Tale*, *Child of Fortune*, and *He Walked Among Us* to piss and moan about Howard Hendrix or anyone else dragging transcendental or psychedelically visionary matters into a science fiction novel or even centering such a novel on them, even making them the thematic apotheosis of one. That's not what disturbs me about *Spears of God*.

What disturbs me about *Spears of God* is that Hendrix therein not only expounds his expository lumps concerning telepathy, paranormal psychic powers, mystic psychedelic experiences, and so forth in the same prose style and "scientifically erudite" manner as the geology of meteorites, real psychopharmacology,

fungus botany, cultural anthropology, and molecular brain biochemistry. And he also seems to be using this equivalency as a literary device to create the illusion that they all have the same scientific legitimacy, exist on the same reality level, and that none of it violates the known laws of mass and energy of the universe in which the readers find themselves.

And it just isn't true.

I know I'm going to catch hell for saying it. It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it, and better someone with no pretension to credentials as a rigorous hard science fiction writer who has certainly used such elements literarily in works he would not deny are truly science fiction than someone more easily put down as a fanatic defender of a lost cause.

"Science fiction," sure, why not? Faster-than-light spaceships, slans, warp-drives running on orgasm, time travel, gods from the machines, so why not telepathy, telekinesis, the triumph of the will over time and space, whatever, as long as it's written with sufficient literary skill and panache to suspend disbelief for the duration of a well-told and entertaining tale.

For the duration of a well-told and entertaining tale.

But as something wrapping itself in the literary cloak of hard science fiction, using the hoary and even clunky literary techniques of hard science fiction to further blur the distinction between true science and rubber science, between true scientific speculation and high-grade bullshit in the minds of readers in a culture where such distinctions are in danger enough of disappearing already does that culture a serious disservice.

It could be argued, and it probably will be, perhaps even by Howard

Hendrix himself, that it is precisely the loss of this distinction, the general ignorance of and indifference to what the laws of mass and energy in the real world really are, the sheer unpopularity of the scientific method as a means of testing imaginative hypothesis against the cold equations, that forces anyone who would write anything even in the general aesthetic mode of hard science fiction to resort to such means to reach a potential readership of a sufficient size for it to be commercially viable.

And on the evidence, this seems all too true, and I suspect that this sort of intellectual compromise is one direction so-called hard science fiction is going to be taking in order to survive at all. So I can hardly blame Howard Hendrix or anyone else for taking it, as long as they really know what they are doing and why.

But such intellectual compromise with demographic reality is a vicious circle, a negative feedback loop. Writers with a hard science fiction bent are forced by cultural and therefore publishing circumstance to compromise the intellectual rigor of a literary mode whose signature is intellectual rigor. This in turn contributes at least in some small way to the cultural circumstance that produces that very unfortunate necessity.

Is promoting this cultural confusion on scientific matters really the only way something like "hard science fiction" can survive?

Maybe not.

Time will tell.

Peter Watts, Mary Rosenblum, and even David Louis Edelman seem to be pursuing alternate strategies. There are nine and sixty ways of composing tribal lays, and every single one of them is right.

But that doesn't mean that all the results will be commercially viable. O

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Spring's almost here. The big Easter convention weekend isn't very far off. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

MARCH 2007

9-11—Potlatch. For info, write: Box 5464, Portland OR 97228. Or phone: (503) 283-0802 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) potlatch-sf.org. (E-mail) potlatch16@gmail.com. Con will be held in: Portland OR (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Many northwest authors usually attend. Exclusively about written SF and fantasy.

14-18—Int'l. Conf. on the Fantastic in the Arts. iafa.org. Wyndham, FL. Lauderdale FL. Ryman. Academic conference.

16-18—LunaCon. lunacon.org. Hilton, Rye NY (near New York City). Christopher Moore, Dave Seely, Frank Dietz.

16-18—MillenniCon. millennicon.org. Ramada Plaza, Cincinnati OH. Wen Spencer, Tom Smith, Donna Waltz.

16-18—RevelCon. majorcrimes.freeservers.com/revelcon. Houston TX. Media-oriented fanzines. Adults (over 18) only.

23-25—Icon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. iconsf.org. State University of New York at Stony Brook. SF/fantasy.

23-25—PortmeirCon, c/o 871 Clover Dr., N. Wales PA 19454. portmeiricon.com. Portmeirion UK. TV's "The Prisoner."

23-25—ChimaeraCon, 138 Av. Del Rey #G, San Antonio TX 78216. chimaeracon.com. Trishway Hall. Gaming & anime.

23-25—SakuraCon, 3702 South Fife, Suite K-2 #78, Tacoma WA 98409. sakuracon.org. Mignogna, Doug Smith. Anime.

29-Apr. 1—World Horror Con. whc2007.org. Marriott, Toronto ON. Michael Marshall Smith, N. Kilpatrick, J. Picacio.

30-Apr. 2—CostumeCon, c/o Mai, 7835 Milan, St. Louis MO 63130. cc25.net. Masqueraders' big annual meet.

31-Apr. 1—ConCinnity. magegaming.org. Guest to be announced. General SF and fantasy, with much gaming.

APRIL 2007

6-8—NorwesCon. (206) 270-7850. norwescon.org. Seattle WA. Kim Stanley Robinson.

6-8—MiniCon, Box 8297, Minneapolis MN 55408. mnstf.org. Minneapolis MN area. Charles de Lint, Charles Vess.

6-9—SakuraCon, 3702 South Fife, Suite K-2 #78, Tacoma WA 98409. sakuracon.org. Mignogna, Doug Smith. Anime.

13-15—WillyCon, c/o WSC, 1111 Main, Wayne NE 68787. willycon.com. scifict@wsc.edu. Wayne State College campus.

27-29—OLNFC, 22 Purefoy Rd., Coventry CV3 5GL, UK. theofficialleonardnimoyfanclub.com. Leicester UK.

20-22—RavenCon, 9623 Hollyburgh Terrace, Charlotte NC 28215. ravencon.com. Airport Doubletree, Richmond VA.

20-22—PenguinCon, Box 401302, Redford MI 48240. penguicon.org. Troy MI. Miholland. Open-source software & SF.

20-22—EerieCon, Box 412, Buffalo NY 14226. eeriecon.org. eeriecon@juno.com. Niagara Falls NY area. Brust, Kress.

MAY 2007

4-6—Malice Domestic, 703 Kenbrook Dr., Silver Spring MD 20902. malicedomestic.org. Arlington VA. Mysteries.

4-6—LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890. leprecon.org. Phoenix AZ. No further details at press.

11-13—Nebula Awards Weekend, c/o SFWA, Box 877, Chestertown MD 21620. (480) 423-0649. sfgwa.org. City TBA.

18-20—KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E7. (204) 689-6053. keycon.org. conchair@keycon.org. K. Anderson.

18-20—MobiCon, Box 161632, Mobile AL 36616. mobicon.org. No further details at press time.

AUGUST 2007

2-5—TuckerCon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. archonstf.org. Collinsville IL. 2007 North American SF Convention. \$120.

30-Sep. 3—Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org. Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. \$220.

AUGUST 2008

6-10—Denvention 3, Box 1349, Denver CO 80201. denvention3.org. Bujold, Whitmore, McCarthy. Worldcon. \$130.

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NEXT ISSUE

JUNE ISSUE

Popular and prolific British writer **Neal Asher** gives us a ringside seat for a fast-paced, suspenseful, and violent game of intrigue, double-cross, and double-double-cross, as a hunt for a stolen alien artifact of immense value forces a former agent out of retirement and into a tense chase across interstellar space into hostile landscapes where wiser humans would never dare to venture, with life or death hanging in the balance at every turn, for some hard lessons in "Alien Archeology." This one is a full-blown, flat-out, unabashed Space Opera, and a thriller of the first water, so don't miss it!

ALSO IN JUNE

Hugo-winner **James Patrick Kelly**, who has had a story in every June issue for more than twenty years, maintains this long tradition by returning for June with "Don't Stop," the compelling story of a woman who never lacks for company—whether she wants it or not!; **R. Neube** shows us how a scholarly researcher on an alien world comes to question the policy of academic detachment and non-interference while carrying out some "Studies in the Field"; Hugo-winner **Harry Turtledove**, King of the Alternate History genre, takes us sideways in time to view the unsettling effect that some "News from the Front" could have had; popular new writer **Elizabeth Bear** relates the poignant story of a battered and limping robot warrior who must struggle to perform one last task for her fallen human comrades, one that has her endlessly searching the "Tideline"; new writer **Carrie Vaughn**, making her *Asimov's* debut demonstrates the drawbacks—and the advantages—of "Marrying In"; popular new writer **Jack Skillingstead**, who has become something of an *Asimov's* regular in recent years, wanders through the mirror-maze labyrinth in the mind of a "Scrawl Daddy"; and new writer **Holly Phillips**, making her *Asimov's* fiction debut (she's had poems here before), guides us to a parched desert town at the End of All Things where the inhabitants wait endlessly for "Three Days of Rain."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg puts in some time "Resurrecting the Quagga"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column, in honor of Robert A. Heinlein's centennial birthday, searches the internet world for signs of "RAH"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our June issue on sale at your newsstand on April 10, 2007. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—either by mail, or online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com)—and make sure that you don't miss any of the great stuff we have coming up for you!

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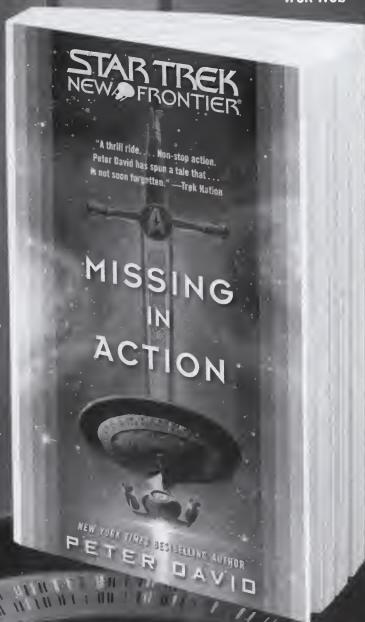
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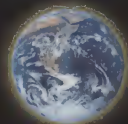
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